

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].

Departmental Contracts

1. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Taoiseach if his Department has engaged the use of external consultants from 1 January 2020 to date; and the details and costs of such engagements. [5537/20]

The Taoiseach: My Department has not engaged any consultants in the period since 1 January 2020.

Departmental Advertising

2. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Taoiseach the way in which his Department co-ordinated, organised, procured and financed the radio, television and newspaper advertisements relating to Covid-19. [5548/20]

The Taoiseach: A whole-of-government communications response was mobilised in response to the COVID-19 emergency to formulate and implement a coordinated response that ensures maximum clarity for citizens, businesses and our wider community.

This aligns with both World Health Organisation (WHO) and European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) advice, both of which emphasise the importance of ensuring the general public is aware of the seriousness of the COVID-19 outbreak and further that a high degree of population understanding, community engagement and acceptance of the measures put in place are key in preventing further spread.

This advice also recommends the provision of easily accessible information such as signs and symptoms of COVID-19, contact details of local health services, the population groups at risk, self-isolation, social distancing measures and travel advice.

It is also recommended that communication strategies should target different audiences and provide the rationale behind the measures, also outlining the necessity to put a support system in place to provide essential services and supplies (e.g. food and medication), and to monitor vulnerable individuals.

The focus of the Government's public awareness programme to date has been to invest in media to build mass awareness and understanding of Government information related to the COVID-19 emergency response as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Given the importance of the information, the detailed understanding that is required, and the

speed at which the information needed to be deployed, the mediums of radio and press, have led the programme to date. These mediums are trusted as both news sources and fixtures of the Irish media landscape, and allow the dissemination of information in a detailed and effective manner to as wide an audience as possible. The press and radio programme has been augmented by a cross-Government coordinated programme on digital media.

Both national and local media have been deployed to get the balance right between main national news sources, which help to communicate information which is important to all of Ireland, and local news sources, which resonate particularly strongly with local communities.

The communications programmes run as part of the Covid 19 response include Community Call, Business Supports, Social Distancing in Public Spaces, Large Scale restrictions, publication of the Roadmap for Reopening of Society and Business and measures being lifted during Phase 1 of the roadmap.

The advertising space is booked through existing contracts which were procured through the Office of Government Procurement (OGP).

European Council Meetings

3. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the latest EU Council meeting and the issues that were discussed. [5550/20]

4. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he has spoken directly to other EU leaders recently about the Covid-19 crisis and associated issues. [5551/20]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 3 and 4 together.

On 23 April, I joined fellow members of the European Council by video conference to discuss management of the coronavirus crisis and to chart a path towards economic and social recovery. This was the fourth such meeting, with previous videoconferences having taken place on 10, 17 and 26 March.

In our meetings, we focussed on five strategic areas of work in which it makes sense to cooperate together:

- Limiting the spread of the virus;
- ensuring the supply of medicines, equipment and goods;
- supporting research;
- tackling socio-economic consequences; and
- co-operating to bring citizens home from other countries.

At our most recent meeting on 23 April, we welcomed the Joint European Roadmap towards the lifting of COVID-19 containment measures published by the Commission on 15 April. It sets out a principles-based and science-led approach to re-opening our societies and our economies and aligns with the approach we have taken as a Government to date.

We also endorsed an economic package, agreed by the Eurogroup, worth up to €540 billion, and asked that it be operational in June. This comprises three safety nets, one for citizens, one for companies, and one for Member States.

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Looking beyond the immediate crisis, we agreed on the need to put in place a Recovery Fund commensurate to the scale of the challenge we will face in rebuilding our economies and businesses, and getting our citizens back to work, as soon as circumstances permit.

On 8 May, I spoke with the Prime Minister of Sweden, Stefan Löfven. We discussed the current Covid-19 crisis and the importance of ongoing discussions at EU level on a recovery fund and on the MFF. We also discussed the current state of play in the EU-UK negotiations on the future partnership, we well as implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement, including the Irish Protocol.

PM Löfven took the opportunity to thank Ireland for assisting in the repatriation of Swedish citizens from India.

On 17 May, I spoke with President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. We discussed the detailed work that the Commission is undertaking in analysing the impact of the Covid19 crisis, sector-by-sector and region-by-region, and its work on a Recovery Fund. We also discussed how this Fund will interact with the Union's budget for the next seven years, and the Commission's plan to bring forward a new proposal in that regard in the near future.

Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements

5. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he has spoken with Prime Minister Johnson recently; and if so, the issues that were discussed. [5552/20]

The Taoiseach: I spoke with the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Friday 15 May. I offered my sympathies to him on his recent illness and hospitalisation, and I also congratulated him on the birth of his son.

We discussed the general Covid 19 situation and our respective experiences in seeking to contain the virus and manage its impacts. We shared information on our respective plans to start easing restrictions. We also talked about how Covid related travel restrictions might be adapted, and agreed that we both want the common travel area to be respected in our respective approaches.

We discussed Brexit and noted the state of play after last week's round of negotiations. We also recalled our commitment to working together on strengthening North - South and East -West links after Brexit, and looked forward to being able to make progress in the period ahead.

I also spoke with First Minister Arlene Foster and deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill on Friday, 15th May, when I informed them of the Government plans to start easing the Covid related restrictions from the 18th of May as set out in the Roadmap. We also discussed ongoing North South cooperation on dealing with Covid and the Memorandum of Understanding agreed to underpin and strengthen North South co-operation on the public health response to the pandemic .

I had previously spoken by phone with the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson on 19 March. The main focus of our discussion on that occasion was the Covid 19 situation and the actions being taken by the two Governments, including in particular in relation to closing schools. We both expressed the wish that political parties in Northern Ireland work collaboratively in the recently restored Executive, and briefly discussed the British proposals on legacy issues.

Departmental Staff

6. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach the number of non-Civil Service staff recruited by his Department since 1 February 2020. [5553/20]

The Taoiseach: In this period, one officer, at a grade equivalent to Administrative Officer, has been formally seconded to my Department from a Public Sector organisation.

Covid-19 Pandemic

7. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Taoiseach the number of persons from outside the house allowed to travel in one car. [6478/20]

The Taoiseach: The current public health advice states that we should stay at home in all circumstances, except in the following situations:

- to travel to and from work, if your work cannot be carried out from home
- to shop for essential food and household goods
- to attend medical appointments and collect medicines
- for vital family reasons, such as providing care to children, elderly or vulnerable people - but excluding social family visits
- for farming purposes - that is food production or care of animals
- to engage in physical exercise within 5 kilometres of home, adhering to 2 metre social distancing
- to meet with friends or family within 5 kilometres in groups of no more than 4, adhering to 2 metre social distancing
- to escape domestic violence

Therefore there are limited situations where it would be necessary for a person to make a car journey with someone from outside their household. To the greatest extent possible, people should not mix with others from outside their household except as permitted in small groups, outdoors, maintaining social distancing. However, there may be circumstances where a car journey may be necessary with someone from outside your household. In such circumstances the latest public health advices including handwashing and respiratory hygiene should be followed at all times.

For those who are cocooning who wish to go for a short drive within 5km, HSE advises that you should only share the journey with someone who is also cocooning in your home and no one else.

Covid-19 Pandemic

8. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Taoiseach if consideration is being given to lifting Covid-19 restrictions on a county basis or by province subject to and in line with all advice from the NPHE. [6488/20]

The Taoiseach: The Roadmap, and the Principles of Approach to reducing measures set out therein, states that ideally a ‘whole-of-country-approach will be taken, however it also includes

potential for a differentiated geographical approach depending on circumstances.

Under the framework, Government will decide what restrictions to ease, at what point in time, having regard to the public health advice of the Department of Health as well as other social and economic considerations.

Departmental Advertising

9. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach the amount spent on online advertising or digital content including social media (details supplied) from 1 January 2020 to 12 May 2020; and the breakdown of the spending. [6511/20]

The Taoiseach: In 2020 so far my Department has spent €4,308.20 on social media buying. This relates to content produced in Autumn 2019.

My Department is coordinating the National whole-of-government communications response to the COVID-19 emergency. There will continue to be expenditure on public information notices to ensure maximum clarity for citizens, businesses and our wider community. This will involve very significant additional expenditure in 2020.

Departmental Advertising

10. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach the amount spent on advertising from 1 January 2020 to 12 May 2020; and the breakdown of the spending. [6512/20]

The Taoiseach: In 2020 so far my Department has spent €4,308.20 on social media buying. This relates to content produced in Autumn 2019.

My Department is coordinating the National whole-of-government communications response to the COVID-19 emergency. There will continue to be expenditure on public information notices to ensure maximum clarity for citizens, businesses and our wider community.

This will involve very significant additional expenditure in 2020.

Covid-19 Pandemic

11. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach the number of persons who can attend a small wedding as provided for in phase 4 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; the number of persons who can attend larger weddings scheduled for phase 5; and if will he provide further clarity on the holding of weddings here in 2020. [6772/20]

The Taoiseach: The Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out a framework and processes for assessing how we can keep the level of transmission of the virus as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions proportionately with the positive social and economic benefits which can accrue from the lifting of some restrictions.

The framework approach contains a range of indicative measures set out under a number of different categories and across a number of potential phases. This is a living, flexible document and will be subject to regular review.

As per the framework, Government will decide what restrictions to ease, at what point in

time, having regard to the public health advice of the Department of Health as well as other social and economic considerations.

Further details and the criteria of the various measures for easing restrictions in later phases, including the number of persons that can attend small and larger weddings, will be determined by the information available as the situation develops and in line with the prevailing public health advice at the time.

Government will continue to provide as much information as possible in as timely a manner as possible as the situation progresses.

Departmental Contracts

12. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence if his Department has engaged the use of external consultants from 1 January 2020 to date; the details and costs of such engagements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5527/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): The following table provides details of external consultants engaged by my Department in the period from 1 January 2020 to date and the associated costs.

Provider of Consultancy Service	Date	Purpose	Amount
Vedette Consulting	28th February 2020	To provide expert advice on the Feasibility of the Establishment of a Research, Technology & Innovation (RTI) Capability for the Irish Defence Organisation	€24,400 ex VAT

Departmental Properties

13. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence if his Department has ownership of the Napoleonic Artillery Battery at a location (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5880/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): As Minister for Defence there are a number of Look Out posts which were invested in me by virtue of the Emergency Powers (No. 315) Order 1944. My Department has advised me that while there are several Look Out posts in Co. Kerry, it does not appear that the one referred to by the Deputy falls within the Department's remit. However, if the Deputy could provide further details in relation to the installation, my officials can investigate the matter further if required.

Overseas Missions

14. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence if members of the Defence Forces serving in Lebanon who are due to return on 19 May 2020 will return on that date; if the required arrangements are in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6179/20]

18. **Deputy Eamon Ryan** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence when Defence Forces personnel serving in Lebanon who have been serving since before Christmas and were due to back in May 2020 will now return; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6509/20]

19. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence the reason Defence Forces personnel are not able to return from overseas in view of the fact that hundreds of seasonal workers travelled here during a pandemic. [6703/20]

22. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence the status of delayed rotations of UNIFIL troops from Lebanon; the work of his Department to seek updates and progress on this matter; when he expects to be able to update families on their return; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6802/20]

23. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence when he will announce a date that Defence Forces personnel serving on a UNIFIL mission will rotate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6965/20]

24. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence when he will announce a date when Defence Forces personnel serving on a UNIFIL mission will rotate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7031/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 14, 18, 19 and 22 to 24, inclusive, together.

On 5 April, 2020, the United Nations Secretary General directed the suspension of all rotations and leave for military personnel serving in United Nations (UN) missions until 30 June, effective immediately.

The UN directed that only in certain very limited and extenuating circumstances would any exemption be allowed, and only where a rotation was vital to maintain a critical operational capability and where the requisite quarantine requirements for incoming and rotating contingents required by the UN and the host state can also be guaranteed. Any such exemption was subject to a decision by the UN Headquarters in New York on a proposal from the Force Commander.

The UN direction impacted over 100,000 UN uniformed personnel from over 120 countries serving world-wide, including Ireland and Defence Forces personnel serving with UN missions. The suspension was based on the protection of local communities as well as that of the peacekeepers during the Covid pandemic.

Immediately upon the direction of the UN Secretary General, the Defence Forces, the Department of Defence and the Department Foreign Affairs and Trade engaged with the UN in the mission areas and at UN Headquarters, through both informal and formal contacts to ensure that the rotation of Irish personnel would be achieved as close as possible to the scheduled dates.

On foot of these efforts, rotations to UNDOF, MINUSMA, KFOR and EUTM Mali have been successfully concluded to date. However, from the outset, the key focus has been on UNIFIL. As our largest mission, it involves the rotation of a significant number of personnel in two stages, two weeks apart and is thus more complex, and requires approvals and permissions from both the UN and from the Host State, not least in terms of their health status and that of the local population in a time of a global pandemic health restrictions.

The UN has agreed to a partial exemption of the suspension for Ireland. This flexibility from the UN resulted from the immediate and coordinated case advanced at mission level, by the Chief of Staff and at UN Headquarters, by the Department of Defence and the Department

of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Given the size of the contingent and the requirements of the mission, the UNIFIL rotations take place in two stages, (commonly known as “chalks”).

I am advised that the indications at present are that the first chalk will take place in the latter part of June and the second in early July. However, contacts with the UN in New York are continuing.

I am acutely aware of the impact the UN decision is having on Defence Force members, as well as the anxiety that this has caused for families. In this connection, I am advised by the military authorities that personnel in mission areas are being briefed as information comes to hand. Personnel and families will continue to be advised and updated by the Defence Forces as further information becomes available.

Departmental Budgets

15. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence the estimated amount it would cost in a full year if the capital budget for Defence Forces built infrastructure, construction and maintenance increased by 15%; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6245/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): The Revised Estimates for Public Services 2020 provides for a Capital allocation of €20 million, for Subhead A.13 - Defence Forces Built Infrastructure; Construction and Maintenance - in the Defence Vote.

This Capital allocation will facilitate the progression of a significant number of Defence Forces Built Infrastructure projects in various military installations located throughout the country.

I published a comprehensive list of individual priority projects in the ‘Defence Forces 5 year Infrastructure Programme 2020 – 2025’, which was published on my Department’s website earlier this year. This programme implements the policy approach contained in the White Paper on Defence to enhance Defence physical infrastructure and accommodation as an important component of defence capability.

The full year cost of increasing this Capital budget by 15% would be €3 million in simple numerical terms. Any increased funding provided for Defence infrastructural investment would be progressed based on the priorities in the five year Infrastructure Programme and taking account of on-going and future Defence Organisational capabilities and resources.

Defence Forces Data

16. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence the number of vacancies in the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service in tabular form. [6246/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): The following table details the establishment, strength and vacancies of the Permanent Defence Force, as of the 30th April 2020:

Branch	Establishment	Strength (WTE)	Vacancies
Army	7,520	6,867	653
Air Corps	886	726	160
Naval Service	1,094	892	202
Total	9,500	8,485	1,015

The Government remains committed to returning to, and maintaining the agreed strength of the Permanent Defence Force at 9,500 personnel as set out in the White Paper on Defence (2015) and, in that context, recruitment is ongoing.

Defence Forces Data

17. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence the vacancies among instructors in the Defence Forces across each branch. [6377/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): It has not been possible to collate the information requested by the Deputy in the timeframe available. I shall provide the figures to the Deputy when they have been collated.

Questions Nos. 18 and 19 answered with Question No. 14.

Defence Forces Medical Services

20. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence if funding will be provided for the recruitment of an additional full-time clinical psychologist for the Defence Forces. [6788/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): There are currently two full-time clinical psychologists employed by the Defence Forces. This number was increased following the review of mental health services for the Defence Forces in 2017, which recommended the appointment of a civilian psychologist in addition to the existing Defence Forces psychologist. There are no plans currently in place to recruit additional clinical psychologists.

Defence Forces Data

21. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence the number of Defence Forces members who have applied to re-enlist on the introduction of the recently amended emergency legislation; and the number re-enlisted. [6792/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): On 1 April last, I announced a scheme to re-enlist former enlisted personnel who have the skills and expertise required to fill identified gaps in the Permanent Defence Force. The scheme will allow for initial re-enlistment for a minimum of six months and up to 3 years.

The re-enlistment of former personnel with the relevant skills and experience was one of the many actions being pursued to address the skill shortages in the PDF. It is a medium to long term initiative which pre-dates the COVID crisis, but which also facilitates the COVID response. While the legislation to permit re-enlistment had been published in the term of the last Dail, the enactment of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (COVID-19) Act

2020 includes this provision. The scheme will support the Defence Forces in responding to, and sustaining their response to, the current COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

The terms and conditions were agreed with the Representative Association, PDFORRA on 1 April last. Under those terms and conditions, individuals who wish to re-enlist will serve for a specific period and for a specific purpose which will involve the use of a particular skill or area of expertise which cannot currently be met through the use of existing military resources. In addition, individuals will be required to meet a range of general eligibility criteria including medical and physical fitness to ensure they are capable of performing normal military duties.

I would like to emphasise that anyone who leaves of their own volition during the period of their enlistment up to three years will not be required to make any payment in order to discharge.

Since announcing the scheme, which is still ongoing, 614 applications have been received.

The Military Authorities have advised that 502 applicants have been deemed eligible at the application stage and are going forward for assessment. Upon completion of this process, and having regard to specific shortages which exist within the Permanent Defence Force, the Chief of Staff will then make recommendations to me as to those that should be re-enlisted.

Questions Nos. 22 to 24, inclusive, answered with Question No. 14.

Departmental Contracts

25. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence the amount spent on external consultants by his Department in 2019; the average hourly rate; if caps or limits on such spending are in place; the way in which conflicts of interest are managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7278/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): In the period from 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2019 the Department of Defence expended €45,972.03 on external consultants. When engaging external consultants my Department has full regard to all relevant legislation and national and EU Procurement Policy and seeks to ensure that value for money is always obtained.

I am not in a position to provide the Deputy with details of the average hourly cost of the consultancies given the different types of consultancy involved and the fact that some contracts were awarded on a fixed price basis.

Human Rights

26. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the steps which have been taken to give effect to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights; if legislation will be introduced to give effect to the principles which has been done in other EU member states; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6978/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland gave effect to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights by adopting a National Plan on Business and Human Rights in November 2017.

Key commitments of the Plan that have been met to date include the establishment of the

Business and Human Rights Implementation Group to oversee its delivery and the completion of a Baseline Assessment of the legislative, policy and regulatory framework for business and human rights in Ireland.

This Assessment, which is available on my Department's website, found that many of the provisions of the UN Guidelines are already covered by existing national and EU legislation. It made a number of recommendations for consideration by the Implementation Group. It identified the need for more detailed study on access to remedy for persons whose human rights have been violated as a result of business activities. Independent research is being commissioned on this topic.

The Baseline Assessment suggested that consideration be given to the adoption of mandatory human rights due diligence provisions and drew attention to measures adopted by other countries that could be used as possible models. I will await the outcome of the Implementation Group's deliberations before proceeding with specific proposals.

Departmental Contracts

27. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if his Department has engaged the use of external consultants from 1 January 2020 to date; the details and costs of such engagements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5531/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is responsible for two votes - Vote 28 (Foreign Affairs and Trade) and Vote 27 (International Cooperation).

The Department commissions external expertise where highly specialised skills are not available internally and in particular where ongoing independent evaluation of programmes and projects is required. During the course of their engagement these consultants and experts may prepare reports and other documentation for the Department.

In-depth analysis of issues by external experts has informed, and continues to inform, the Department's policies, allowing for a more targeted use of resources and greater accountability in the allocation of budgets.

These services are procured by open competitive tendering processes in accordance with EU and national rules and comply with the overall value for money objectives.

A small number of consultancies are engaged directly by our Missions abroad from time to time and in some instances they prepare technical reports relating to Ireland's overseas development aid programme.

The following consultants were engaged by my Department from 1 January 2020 and to date in 2020:

Name	Costs	Details
David Bruckert (Cultural Consultant)	€2,500	Provided advice on the development of the Expo 2020 Be Inspired programme, by participating in the Expo 2020 Open Call Selection Committee.

Name	Costs	Details
Nutrition Works	€15,820	Nutrition Tech Support Consultancy – Facilitation Service
MJB Consulting	€24,016	Task Force for Rural Africa and Food Systems
Democrashe	€1,499.18	EU Taskforce on Women, Peace, Security meeting – Gender Empowerment Women/Girls
Gumfoot Consultancy Limited	€Nil (to date)	Process Review of the Irish Council for International Students for the Fellowship Programme
Stewart Gee	€Nil (to date)	Agricultural Research Partners Review

Passport Applications

28. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the date the passport office will recommence the processing of routine passport applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5703/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Passport Service is operating a limited service at this time which has allowed us to both reassign staff to our consular services, assisting our citizens abroad and redeploy staff to critical areas including contact tracing for the HSE and Covid-19 payments for Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, all critical services at this time.

The Passport Service continues to process emergency passports for our citizens at home and abroad in cases of emergency. Our WebChat service and a dedicated travel emergency mailbox continue to operate through which we can be contacted in such circumstances.

The Passport Service will continue to follow Government guidelines regarding Covid-19. The Passport Service welcomes the recently released Return to Work Safely Protocols developed by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, the Health and Safety Authority and the Health Service Executive. The Passport Service is working to implement this guidance to ensure a safe return to work for our staff in line with the Government's roadmap to ease COVID-19 restrictions and reopen Ireland's economy and society.

Applicants can still apply for passports, including both passport renewals and first time passports, using the Passport Online service, but the usual turnaround times cannot be guaranteed due to the limited services available at present. Passport Online is the cheapest and most convenient way to apply for a passport and this service has won awards for its user friendly process, including a NALA award for the use of plain English. Passport Online expanded in 2019 to include first time applicants in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Great Britain and Europe. Irish citizens including children can also renew their passports online 24/7, from anywhere in the world. It is planned that the production of online applications will begin in Phase 3 (29 June) of the Government's roadmap. However, turnaround times will be impacted by social distancing requirements to provide our staff with a safe place to work.

Passport applications made via the postal channel require extensive handling and processing by passport staff and as these staff are currently reassigned to other critical services, this application channel is not available at present. The processing of postal applications will recommence when the Passport Service resumes our full normal services.

Middle East Issues

29. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his views on the planned annexation of the Jordan Valley; if this issue has been raised at EU level; the actions that will be taken at national and EU level in response to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5762/20]

38. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if the proposed annexation of Palestinian lands in the West Bank by the Israeli Administration was discussed at his recent meeting with his European counterparts; the response to this breach of international law proposed; and if the issue of sanctions or other appropriate responses was discussed. [6784/20]

41. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his views on the proposed annexation of the West Bank by Israel; the steps he has taken to help prevent this from happening; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6973/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 29, 38 and 41 together.

A new Israeli Government was sworn in on 17 May, and of course I wish it well in these very difficult circumstances, as it takes on the challenge of combatting COVID-19. I take note, however, of comments made by Prime Minister Netanyahu in the Knesset on 17 May, regarding the annexation of territory in the West Bank, which is part of the occupied Palestinian territory, as well as the provisions on annexation in the political agreement reached during coalition negotiations in Israel.

As I stated publicly on 23 April: “I think it important, as a friend and partner of Israel, to be very clear about the gravity of any such step. Annexation of territory by force is prohibited under international law, including the UN Charter, whenever and wherever it occurs, in Europe’s neighbourhood or globally. This is a fundamental principle in the relations of states and the rule of law in the modern world. No one state can set it aside at will.

Ireland remains committed to a negotiated two-state solution that ends the occupation that began in 1967, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States, on the basis of international law, the internationally-agreed parameters and relevant UN Security Council Resolutions. This accords with the European Union’s long-standing position. We firmly believe that this is the only outcome which will provide long term security, freedom and prosperity to both peoples.”

The unilateral annexation by Israel of any part of the occupied Palestinian territory would have no legitimacy, and would not be recognised or accepted by Ireland or the international community more generally. I have in the past made my views on this clear to Israeli leaders, including during my most recent visit to Israel in December 2019. My officials continue to convey our views to the Israeli authorities at appropriate opportunities.

The Middle East Peace Process, including the issue of annexation, was discussed at the 15 May videoconference meeting of EU Foreign Ministers. In advance of that meeting, I and senior officials in my Department discussed the issue with a large number of EU Member States to encourage a clear and united position.

During the VC discussion, the strong view expressed was that annexation was completely unacceptable and, if implemented, would be a grave violation of international law. This is not just a principle that applies to Israel and Palestine but one which is global. I, and many other Ministers, emphasised the need for EU action to deter such a damaging unilateral action, which

would inevitably have negative consequences for the EU-Israel relationship. There was broad agreement that the EU and its MS need to engage in outreach with the new Israeli Government and make clear our deep concerns.

I welcome the very clear statements that have been made on this matter in recent weeks by EU High Representative/Vice President Josep Borrell, who has said that any annexation would constitute a serious violation of international law that could not pass unchallenged.

I will continue to prioritise this issue, working closely with EU partners and countries in the region.

Human Rights Cases

30. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the position regarding the human rights situation in Bahrain including the detention of political prisoners; if this situation has been discussed at EU Foreign Affairs Council meetings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6007/20]

33. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if Ireland will consider introducing a joint statement on Bahrain at the Human Rights Council in Geneva regarding that country’s treatment of political prisoners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6325/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 30 and 33 together.

The human rights situation in Bahrain remains a matter of concern. Although progress has been made in certain areas, there continue to be instances of violations of fundamental freedoms, including the targeting of human rights defenders.

Ireland participates actively in the UN Human Rights Council, and regularly raises the case of human rights in Bahrain at that forum, both in national statements and in our support of EU Statements, which I believe is the right way to highlight this issue.

Discussions are still ongoing on how the next session of the UN Human Rights Council will be held, in view of the current situation. No decision has yet been taken on national or EU interventions at that session. In our planning for the next session, we will consider carefully which priorities to set, with a view to focusing the weight of Ireland’s efforts, and the Council’s attention, on the most grave and troubling situations globally.

While the issue of Bahrain has not been raised at the EU Foreign Affairs Council recently, the EU and Bahrain hold regular discussions on human rights issues. At the most recent informal EU-Bahrain Human Rights dialogue in November 2019, issues discussed included the right to a fair trial, prison conditions (including the need to ensure adequate medical treatment for prisoners), and the overall human rights situation in the country. The EU continues to follow up directly with the Bahraini authorities; for example, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore, recently wrote to the Bahraini Minister for Foreign Affairs specifically highlighting the ongoing detention of Human Rights defenders and the conditions of their detention.

We also raise our concerns about the human rights situation, and the treatment of detainees in particular, in our bilateral discussions with Bahrain. When I met with the former Bahraini Minister of Foreign Affairs at the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2019, I

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made a point of raising the human rights situation directly with him, expressing the hope that we can have an open and honest discussion on these issues. Officials from my Department met with a delegation from Bahrain in November 2019 and had an in-depth discussion on prison conditions and the justice system in Bahrain. Among the issues raised were Ireland's concerns about the imprisonment of certain individuals, apparently on the basis of opinions they had expressed; and the provision of healthcare for prisoners in Bahrain. The Bahraini officials outlined specific plans to improve prisoners' access to healthcare, and my officials continue to follow up on this matter.

Ireland will continue to monitor developments in Bahrain, and to call on the Bahraini Government to deliver on its stated commitment to make progress in relation to human rights. We shall do so both directly with Bahraini officials, as well as at EU and international level, whenever opportunities arise.

Passport Services

31. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade when a service (details supplied) will resume; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6105/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Passport Service is operating a limited service at this time which has allowed us to both reassign staff to our consular services, assisting our citizens abroad and redeploy staff to critical areas including contact tracing for the HSE and Covid-19 payments for DEASP, all critical services at this time.

The Passport Service continues to process emergency passports for our citizens at home and abroad in cases of emergency. Our WebChat service and a dedicated travel emergency mailbox continue to operate through which we can be contacted in such circumstances.

The Passport Service will continue to follow Government guidelines regarding Covid-19. The Passport Service welcomes the recently released Return to Work Safely Protocols developed by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, the Health and Safety Authority and the Health Service Executive. The Passport Service is working to implement this guidance to ensure a safe return to work for our staff in line with the Government's roadmap to ease COVID-19 restrictions and reopen Ireland's economy and society.

Applicants can still apply for passports, including both passport renewals and first time passports, using the Passport Online service, but the usual turnaround times cannot be guaranteed due to the limited services available at present. Passport Online is the cheapest and most convenient way to apply for a passport and this service has won awards for its user friendly process, including a NALA award for the use of plain English. Passport Online expanded in 2019 to include first time applicants in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Great Britain and Europe. Irish citizens including children can also renew their passports online 24/7, from anywhere in the world. It is planned that the production of online applications will begin in Phase 3 (29 June) of the Government's roadmap. However, turnaround times will be impacted by social distancing requirements to provide our staff with a safe place to work.

Passport applications made via the postal channel require extensive handling and processing by passport staff and as these staff are currently reassigned to other critical services, this application channel is not available at present. The processing of postal applications will recommence when the Passport Service resumes our full normal services.

Passport Applications

32. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade when postal applications for passports will be facilitated again in view of the fact the current situation by which only online applications are being accepted is causing difficulties for some elderly persons and those who cannot operate computers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6243/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Passport Service is operating a limited service at this time, which has allowed us to both reassign staff to our consular services, assisting our citizens abroad and redeploy staff to critical areas including contact tracing for the HSE and Covid-19 payments for Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, all critical services at this time.

The Passport Service continues to process emergency passports for our citizens at home and abroad in cases of emergency. Our WebChat service and a dedicated travel emergency mailbox continue to operate through which we can be contacted in such circumstances. If an applicant does not have computer facilities to access WebChat, then someone on their behalf with access to computer facilities can initially make contact with the WebChat team to outline the query and provide the applicant's phone number. If the case in question is an emergency, a passport officer will call the applicant directly to provide them with assistance. The Passport Service's regular customer care phone lines will be available again when normal services resume.

The Passport Service will continue to follow Government guidelines regarding Covid-19. The Passport Service welcomes the recently released Return to Work Safely Protocols developed by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, the Health and Safety Authority and the Health Service Executive. The Passport Service is working to implement this guidance to ensure a safe return to work for our staff in line with the Government's roadmap to ease COVID-19 restrictions and reopen Ireland's economy and society.

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Passport applications made via the postal channel require extensive handling and processing by passport staff and as these staff are currently reassigned to other critical services, this application channel is not available at present. The processing of postal applications will recommence when the Passport Service resumes our full normal services.

Question No. 33 answered with Question No. 30.

Diplomatic Representation

34. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his plans to open a new Irish Consulate General office in Doha, Qatar. [6379/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland enjoys excellent relations with Qatar, with the Embassy of Ireland in Abu Dhabi being accredited to Qatar on a non-residential basis. While travel between Abu Dhabi and Doha has become more complex in recent years, the Ambassador of Ireland in Abu Dhabi continues to visit Qatar regularly in support of our broad policy objectives, including the development of political and trade relations and supporting the needs of Irish businesses and the wider Irish community.

The Embassy in Abu Dhabi has also put in place a system of pre-scheduled visits to Qatar approximately every eight weeks to provide consular services to the Irish community, although obviously in the current situation those services have to be provided virtually for the time being.

In considering the expansion of our diplomatic representations overseas, a range of factors are taken into account, including our national political, economic, and trade priorities, as well as availability of resources. There are no immediate plans to open an Embassy in Qatar.

Departmental Communications

35. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he or his officials have recently contacted the US Ambassador to Ireland regarding the decision of the US Government to temporarily halt funding the WHO; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6522/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): COVID-19 is a global crisis, requiring a collective, coordinated, global response. Ireland's priority is to provide vital support to the multilateral system's efforts to mitigate the impact of the pandemic in the most vulnerable countries, protecting their people and, ultimately, Irish people also, on the basis that "nobody is safe until everybody is safe."

The World Health Organisation, part of the UN system, is at the centre of that global response, working to control the spread of COVID-19 and mitigate its impact. Ireland, as a member of the WHO, has been guided by advice from that organisation in our response to the pandemic.

Recognising the WHO's important role, Ireland was the first country to contribute to the WHO COVID-19 appeal. This appeal has since been rolled into the UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan, which aims at a coherent response across the UN system to COVID-19. Ireland is also part of Team Europe, the EU's response to the pandemic. That collective response, focusing on global leadership and unity, remains at the heart of Ireland's approach.

There has been no contact with the US Ambassador to Ireland on the matter at hand.

Diplomatic Representation

36. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the embassies currently without an ambassador; the length of time each embassy has been without an ambassador; when each post will be filled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6523/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The diplomatic mission network plays a key role in promoting and protecting the values, interests and economic well-being of the country and its citizens. There are sixty six Embassies, seven Permanent Missions, sixteen Consulates General and four other Representative Offices in the

global network.

Heads of Mission positions are filled by Ambassadors, Consuls General and Permanent Representatives as well as by Chargé d’Affaires in a small number of cases when the role is occupied on a temporary basis.

Currently five Embassies are headed by a Chargé d’Affaires: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Athens, Helsinki and Vienna. The dates on which officers took up duty is included in the following table.

These assignments are generally of limited duration but it should be noted that the current public health emergency and measures to combat the spread of the virus, including restrictions on travel, may have an impact on the timing of rotations. The rotation of officers at all levels to ensure effective cover and continuity of service is under continuous review by the Department.

Embassy	Date Chargé assumed duty
Abuja	December 2018
Addis Ababa	August 2019
Athens	November 2019
Helsinki	August 2019
Vienna	April 2020

Dublin-Monaghan Bombings

37. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he has had recent discussions with the UK Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on the need for the UK Government to respond positively to the unanimous requests of Dáil Éireann concerning the Dublin and Monaghan bombings of 1974; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6656/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Last week, 17 May, was the 46th anniversary of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings of 1974 in which thirty three were killed and hundreds seriously injured, attacks which saw the largest loss of life on a single day in the Troubles.

While it was unfortunately not possible to gather at the memorial on Talbot Street in Dublin this year to mark the anniversary, we still stand together as a country at this time in remembrance and in solidarity with the victims’ families and survivors.

The Government will continue to seek the full truth of these appalling attacks, and some measure of closure for those affected, in accordance with the three Motions passed unanimously by Dáil Éireann.

The All-Party motion on the 1974 Dublin Monaghan bombings adopted by the Dáil on 25 May 2016 has, like those adopted in 2008 and 2011, been conveyed to the British Government.

These motions call on the British Government to allow access by an independent, international judicial figure to all original documents relating to the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, as well as the Dublin bombings of 1972 and 1973, the bombing of Kay’s Tavern in Dundalk and the murder of Seamus Ludlow.

The Government continues to actively pursue the implementation of these all-Party Dáil motions. We have consistently raised the issue with the British Government on a bilateral basis,

including at the British-Irish Inter-Governmental Conference.

I and Minister Flanagan have made clear to our counterparts that the absence of a response from the British Government is of deep concern to the Government, and that there remains an urgent need for a response.

The Government will continue to engage with the British Government on this request, at senior political level and in official level engagement by my Department, to pursue all possible avenues to achieve progress on this issue, consistent with the request made by this House and until a resolution is found.

The Government maintains a close and cooperative relationship with Justice for the Forgotten, as we continue work to seek the full facts of the appalling events of 17 May 1974 and of other attacks in this jurisdiction during the Troubles.

The Government welcomes the announcement by the PSNI on 30 November 2019 that former Chief Constable Jon Boucher will head an Independent Police Team to conduct an analytical report on the Glenanne Gang series of cases.

The Government is conscious that this work by Chief Constable Boucher is very relevant to a number of cases of the utmost concern for victims' families and survivors, both North and South, who suffered in the murderous attacks by the so-called Glenanne Gang. This includes the Hillcrest Bar bombing, and the Miami Showband attack, the bombing of Kay's Tavern in Dundalk and also, of course, the Dublin and Monaghan bombings.

It is to be hoped that the report being conducted by Chief Constable Boucher will contribute to the long process of justice, truth and acknowledgement of what happened in these awful cases, where collusion is a feature.

Chief Constable Boucher is conducting a police investigation, and as such will be in a position to seek the cooperation of the Gardaí through the framework of Mutual Legal Assistance, which underpins the excellent cooperation that exists between the Gardaí and the PSNI more broadly.

The Government will be supportive of facilitating this investigation, subject to the requirements of the law, as we have other investigative processes in Northern Ireland, in relation to the attacks conducted by Glenanne Gang and of course other cases from the Troubles.

In any scenario, we will continue to engage with the British Government, to pursue all possible avenues to achieve progress on this issue, consistent with the request made by this House, until a satisfactory resolution is found.

Question No. 38 answered with Question No. 29.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

39. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the specific monetary or other supports that can be offered to Irish citizens destitute abroad due to Covid-19 and unable to pay the costs requested by airlines to bring them home. [6785/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade provides all possible consular advice and assistance to citizens overseas, where requested and where appropriate.

As part of the comprehensive approach to the repatriation of our citizens overseas in the context of COVID-19, our focus has been on helping citizens who are normally resident in Ireland to return home safely on commercial flights where possible and, where not possible and if available, on chartered repatriation flights.

As is standard practice across the EU, UK and elsewhere, citizens are required to pay for all flights, whether commercial or chartered. In a few very exceptional cases, consideration has been given to providing a loan to cover part of the cost of the flight, on the basis of this being repaid in full within six months. As with all consular assistance, resources are focused where they are most needed, based on an assessment of vulnerability in individual cases.

To date, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, including our network of Embassies and Consulates overseas, has advised and assisted over 6,000 citizens in returning home to Ireland from 129 countries. We will continue to provide all possible consular advice and assistance to those affected by the COVID-19 crisis.

EU Issues

40. Deputy Cian O’Callaghan asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the Foreign Ministers of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden in correspondence dated 6 May 2020 have raised serious concerns regarding the rule of law and democracy in Hungary; his views on these concerns; if other EU member states will be supported in their efforts to ensure democracy and the rule of law is maintained across the European Union; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6968/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am aware of the Joint Letter from the Foreign Ministers of the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) to the Secretary General of the Council of Europe in regard to Member State responses to the Covid-19 outbreak. This followed on from the release on 8 April of a “toolkit” on respecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law during the COVID-19 crisis by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, and a Statement of 22 April last which was agreed by all 47 Council of Europe Member States. Both of these initiatives were welcomed by the EU.

The rule of law, democracy and respect for fundamental rights are core principles of the EU. It is precisely during a time of crisis such as this that all EU Member States should stick to these shared values.

Ireland along with 18 other EU Member States issued a Joint Statement on the Rule of Law in the context of the Covid-19 crisis on 1 April last. Ireland and the other signatories affirmed their support for the European Commission initiative to monitor the emergency measures and their application across Member States to ensure the fundamental values of the Union are upheld.

On 22 April last, I took part in an informal video conference with my Foreign Minister counterparts to discuss the EU and Member States’ response to the COVID-19 outbreak. We exchanged views on the measures taken so far, at both EU and national levels, and the importance of ensuring such measures are proportionate and respect fundamental rights and the rule of law.

Question No. 41 answered with Question No. 29.

Middle East Issues

42. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if the issue of an EU wide ban on the importation of goods from occupied territories has been raised with his European counterparts in view of the support for the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018 in Dáil Éireann; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6981/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland has a very clear position on Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian Territory and the Golan Heights. They are illegal under international law, notably being contrary to the Fourth Geneva Convention, and actively undermine the prospects for a two-state solution.

As I have said many times in the Dáil, the regulation of international trade, including in relation to settlement goods, is a matter of exclusive EU competence. The Occupied Territories Bill asks the Government to do something which is not legally in its power. The European Commission confirmed to the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, Trade and Defence in June of last year that “...the EU has exclusive competence on the common commercial policy, and that as a customs union, the EU applies common arrangements for imports of goods from third countries uniformly across the Union. In principle, only the EU can decide to prohibit the importation of goods and services and not the Member States individually.”

To introduce such an EU-wide ban on the importation of settlement goods would require consensus among EU Member States, and the political will for such a policy does not exist. For that reason, I have focused my energies at EU level on other aspects of the Israel-Palestine issue, in order to ensure the best possible policy outcomes.

As it stands, however, EU law does already make a meaningful distinction between Israel, and settlements in occupied territory. This distinction has important practical effects. Since settlements are not part of Israel, the EU-Israel Association Agreement does not apply to them. This means that different tariffs apply to goods from settlements, and settlements are not eligible for participation in EU-Israel programmes.

Ireland has been vigilant to ensure that EU law in this regard is upheld. For example, in 2018, Ireland, as an interested Member State, lodged observations in a case which was referred to the Court of Justice of the European Union, challenging the implementation of EU rules on the labelling of foodstuffs originating from settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory. The court’s judgment, issued on 12 November 2019, confirmed that foodstuffs originating in territories occupied by the State of Israel, must bear the indication of their territory of origin, and when these products originate from an Israeli settlement, this must also be made clear on the label. Clear and non-misleading indication of origin for certain goods is an essential part of the EU’s consumer policy.

EU law and guidelines on goods from settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory clearly differentiate between settlements on the one hand, and Israel, on the other. As such, they are an important part of the EU contribution to the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2334. Ireland will maintain its vigilance to ensure full implementation of these laws and guidelines.

International Bodies

43. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and

Trade if Ireland will seek observer member status of the Arctic Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6990/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): In recent years, the Arctic has become a region of increasing geopolitical importance. The growing environmental and strategic importance of the Arctic has very significant impact, with melting ice having far-reaching implications for climate change and maritime access across the region.

My Department has been undertaking a mapping exercise to assess Ireland's engagement with the Arctic and related issues across a range of areas and to determine the merits of a closer engagement with the region.

It is clear there is a rationale for enhancing Ireland's engagement on the Arctic across the range of established fora, including the potential to submit an application for observer status with the Arctic Council. It is clear that any application would have to be underpinned by a very strong case detailing how Ireland could contribute to the Council's work. Additionally, any application and possible eventual participation as an observer at the Council would require a cross-Government commitment to ensure that Ireland could play an active and effective role.

A decision on whether to apply formally for observer status with the Arctic Council is a matter for the Government and a proposal is expected to be submitted for consideration by the new Government in due course.

Departmental Contracts

44. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the amount spent on external consultants by his Department in 2019; the average hourly rate; if caps or limits on such spending are in place; the way in which conflicts of interest are managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7282/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is responsible for two Votes - Vote 27 (International Co-operation) and Vote 28 (Foreign Affairs and Trade).

This Department spent €415,108 on external consultants in 2019 across both Votes.

The Department seeks to minimise expenditure on consultants. It commissions external expertise in line with national and EU procurement rules in areas where highly specialised skills are not available, in particular where independent evaluation of projects is required. During the course of their engagement, these consultants and experts may prepare reports and other analysis or documentation for the Department.

In-depth analysis of issues by external experts has informed, and continues to inform, the Department's policies, allowing for a more targeted use of resources and greater accountability in the allocation of budgets.

All consultancy procurement in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is carried out in accordance with relevant procurement legislation and EU Directives. This competitive tender process establishes the cost of the work which acts as the limit for the consultancy work. As a public body, the Department complies with the procedures for public procurement laid down in the Public Procurement Guidelines for Goods and Services published by the Office of Government Procurement (OGP) in 2019. Consultancy projects are tendered for on the basis of completion of an entire piece of work and not on an hourly basis. Therefore the Department

does not maintain details of the various hourly rates. The Department maintains strict budgetary oversight of all consultancies to ensure that all costs are in line with the relevant tender.

The Department acts appropriately to prevent, identify and remedy conflicts of interest in the conduct of a procurement procedure to avoid any distortion of competition and to ensure equal treatment of consultancy tenders. The conflict of interest procedure involves ascertaining if Evaluation Committee members have any actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest in participating in the tender evaluation process. Every Committee member is required to complete and sign a conflict of interest declaration in advance of the evaluation process. When a conflict of interest has been declared in advance of evaluation, the nature of the conflict and any deliberations on managing the conflict together with the resolution is recorded in the procurement file.

A small number of consultancies are engaged directly by our Missions abroad from time to time and in some instances they prepare technical reports relating to Ireland's overseas development aid programme.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

45. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Finance if childcare employees who are due to return to work following maternity leave are eligible for a subsidy under the temporary wage subsidy scheme [5560/20]

64. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that women returning from maternity leave cannot be included in the wage subsidy scheme due to the fact they were not on the payroll in January or February; if measures will be taken to address this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5650/20]

97. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to ensure that parents on maternity leave or parental leave can avail of and be included in the wage subsidy scheme upon their return to work (details supplied). [6235/20]

120. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if the temporary wage subsidy scheme will be extended to cater for women on maternity leave specifically those who were not on the payroll in February 2020 due to their maternity leave; if so, if such an extension will require primary legislation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6672/20]

129. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Finance if the Revenue Commissioners will be instructed to administer the temporary wage subsidy scheme in accordance with the maternity protections provided by the Employment Equality Acts. [6857/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 45, 64, 97, 120 and 129 together.

The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is a temporary emergency measure to deal with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy, intended to maximise staff retention and firm viability by maintaining the link between the employer and employee insofar as is possible through this truly exceptional period. In that regard it is noted that as of 14 May, over 54,100 employers and over 464,400 employees have thus far benefited from the measure.

It ultimately gives a sum to employers to cover a portion of their wage bill in circumstances where the employer's business has been negatively impacted by the restrictions that have had to be introduced to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The sum the employer receives is

based on the employees who were on their payroll on 29 February 2020, the net salary such employees received in January and February 2020, as well as the extent to which the employer remains able to continue to discharge their legal obligation to pay their employees' salaries.

The TWSS is built upon historic PAYE returns made to Revenue. One of the core principles of the scheme that is necessary to prevent abuse is the requirement that the employees for which a claim is submitted must be on the payroll of the employer as at 29 February 2020. Thus, where an individual commenced a new employment after 29 February 2020, or returned to the payroll of his or her employer after that date following a period of unpaid leave, whether maternity related or otherwise, that salary cannot be included in the calculation of the sum that is available to the employer under the TWSS.

The 29 February payroll decision has consequences for many groups, however, the scheme is being administered in a manner that is fully compliant with all relevant legislation and no discriminatory treatment of workers arises.

Further, the position in relation to the TWSS does not affect any legal obligations that the employer may have to their employee as regards any terms, conditions or entitlements of their employment, including pay. The question of an individual's employment entitlements following their resumption of work after a period of leave, and the question of what wages an employer may or may not be in a position to pay such an employee are matters between the employee and the employer – and the entire period of pregnancy and maternity leave is a special protected period under the law.

It is understood that although the employer may not be able to claim the TWSS for a person who has not been on the payroll on 29 February but is entitled to return to work after this date, they remain obliged to honour their obligations as an employer as the full suite of employment rights legislation continues to apply in relation to all employees and their employers for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

As regards the operation of the TWSS, I am aware of the matter that has been raised by the Deputies and have instructed officials to re-examine whether such workers may be accommodated at this time within the scheme.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

46. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Finance if crèches that filed their P30 form and other documentation before 1 April 2020 are eligible for full payment under the temporary wage subsidy scheme. [5564/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Government's priority in so far as the Temporary Wages Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is concerned was and is to ensure that all employers experiencing significant negative economic disruption from COVID-19 can register for and start to receive payment quickly. The purpose of the scheme is to ensure that the relationship between employers and employees is maintained to the greatest extent possible so that businesses can restart operations quickly once that becomes possible. The scheme is available to eligible employers across all sectors, excluding the public service and non-commercial semi-state sector, this includes businesses that have closed due to the Covid-19 restrictions and those that continue to operate and employ their workforce. The main eligibility criteria for the scheme are that:

- the business is suffering significant negative economic impact due to the pandemic;

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- the employees were on the payroll at 29 February 2020; and,
- the February 2020 payroll submissions were submitted to Revenue before 15 March 2020.

I have been advised by Revenue that following a review of cases since the TWSS commenced, it became apparent that a number of employers have been unable to access the scheme because they failed the 15 March 2020 rule, but had qualified under all other conditions of the scheme and were otherwise tax compliant. Given the purpose of the scheme, Revenue decided, under its care and management provisions, to allow such employers access the scheme provided:

- the employees in respect of whom the wage subsidy is claimed were included on the employer's payroll on 29 February 2020

- the February 2020 payroll submissions were submitted to Revenue before 1 April 2020, and

- the payroll submissions for all previous months were submitted to Revenue before 15 March 2020.

The TWSS builds on payroll data returned to Revenue through its real-time PAYE system. Where a business qualifies for the TWSS under the revised criteria, the wage subsidies under the scheme are payable for eligible employees in respect of payroll submissions made on or after 24 April 2020, with a pay date on or after 24 April 2020, and are not retrospective.

Eligible employers can participate in the scheme in respect of any eligible employees on their payroll at 29 February 2020, including rehired staff who had been temporarily laid off after that date. Where an employee previously laid off has been re-hired, the employee will qualify for the scheme once their claim for social welfare benefit (Pandemic Unemployment Payment/ Jobseekers Benefit) is ceased. Eligibility for the scheme can be satisfied by an employer once they meet the relevant criteria, which can be at any point in time during the scheme's duration.

Finally, the Deputy referred to P30 forms. Such forms are no longer in use following the introduction of PAYE Modernisation. Section 985G of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 sets out that Revenue issue a monthly statement to the employer outlining a summary of the payroll submissions made by the employer for the month. If no corrective action is taken by the employer, this statement is deemed to be a monthly return by the employer made on the return due date.

Help-To-Buy Scheme

47. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance if homes built for a number of years but never lived in or finished can be included in the help to buy scheme for first-time buyers; and if not, the reason therefor. [5710/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The legislation governing HTB is set out in section 477C of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997.

The Help to Buy scheme (HTB) is an income tax incentive designed to assist first-time purchasers with a deposit to buy or build a new house or apartment. The incentive gives a refund of Income Tax and Deposit Interest Retention Tax (DIRT) paid in the State over the previous four years, subject to limits outlined in the legislation.

In addition to requiring that the new property is occupied as the sole or main residence of

a first time purchaser, the legislation also defines a ‘qualifying residence’ for the purposes of the scheme; it must be a new building which was not, at any time, used or suitable for use as a dwelling. Therefore, if the property was at any time suitable for use as a dwelling it would not qualify for the HTB incentive.

I am advised by Revenue that where there is uncertainty regarding whether a property was previously suitable for use as a dwelling, first time buyers intending to undertake such purchases should contact Revenue via My Enquiries and they will consider the application on a case by case basis. In order for Revenue to make an assessment on whether a dwelling was unfinished and not suitable for use as a dwelling, they would require sufficient evidence from the builder, engineer or other professionals working on the project, about the condition of the dwelling which made it uninhabitable/unfinished. If there is any other information (photos, etc.) that’s relevant in helping Revenue conclude that the property meets the criteria in the legislation, this should also be included.

VAT Rate Application

48. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Finance his plans and proposals to assist businesses especially in the tourism sector in respect of re-examining the VAT rate for the tourism area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5719/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Government is fully aware of the unprecedented impact that the coronavirus is having on business and people’s livelihoods. In this regard a range of measures have been introduced to provide income support to those who need it while also giving confidence to employers to retain the link with employees so that when this crisis passes - and it will pass – our people can get back to work as quickly and seamlessly as possible.

In addition to current support measures, my officials are examining a range of possible measures to ensure that the economy is in a position to recover rapidly while maintaining a stable tax base.

Pension Provisions

49. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to consider allowing certain pension scheme members access to additional voluntary contributions as a means of stimulating the economy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5721/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): In relation to the Deputy’s proposal to allow people access a portion of their pension fund before retirement, the long established policy of providing tax relief for pension contributions is to encourage saving by employers, employees and the self-employed towards their retirement income. A repayment of contributions is only permitted in highly limited circumstances, for example due to ill-health, and as such, this would be subject to income tax.

The policy rationale underpinning this is the State provides generous tax relief on both pension contributions and fund growth to ensure that people have sufficient savings to fund their regular costs and expenses during their retirement. However, on actual drawdown a pension is subject to tax at the individual’s marginal tax rate. In the event of any early encashment of a pension fund the tax relief received must be clawed back. It should also be noted that any refund of pension contributions is governed by the terms of the specific scheme or product.

As is the case with all matters of policy, while they are monitored on a continuous basis, I do not have any plan at this time to revise these pension arrangements.

It is important to point out that a very significant and comprehensive package of measures has already been put in place to assist those who have suffered a loss of income arising from the COVID-19 crisis. This includes the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and bank-related forbearance measures.

Revenue data from 14 May 2020 show there are over 53,900 employers registered with Revenue and more than 464,400 employees had received at least one payment under TWSS. The data are available on Revenue's website at the link: www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/registrations/wage-subsidy-scheme-statistics-14-may-2020.pdf.

Data from the Department of Employment Affairs & Social Protection show there were 584,600 people in receipt of a Pandemic Unemployment Payment on 18 May 2020.

The data are available at the link: www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/74440/d2d234214f994fe6966afdb28eed1e55.pdf#page=1.

Vehicle Registration

50. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Finance the mechanism relating to VRT payments on vehicles that were purchased before the closure of the NCT/VRT offices in order to be in a position to drive and insure the car and comply with the requirements of the Revenue Commissioners; if an estimated billing process will be put in place to be paid in the interim in order to access a registration here to insure and tax the vehicle in accordance with regulations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5733/20]

51. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Finance the position from an enforcement stance relating to VRT payments on United Kingdom vehicles that were purchased before the closure of the NCT/VRT offices, in order to be in a position to drive and insure the car and comply with the Revenue Commissioners and Road Acts requirements; if there is a waiver in place to allow citizens to drive imported UK vehicles until such time that the VRT offices re-open and Irish registrations can be issued whilst complying with Irish law; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5738/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 50 and 51 together.

I am informed by Revenue that used vehicles brought into the State from the UK or elsewhere are required to be registered within 30 days in normal circumstances. However, as National Car Testing Service (NCTS) Centres which perform the registration service are closed at present as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, this requirement is not being enforced by Revenue. Owners of such vehicles will not be required to reregister the vehicles until the VRT service operated by the NCTS Centres has recommenced.

I am advised by Revenue that it is not possible to put in place an estimated billing process as both the vehicle and the supporting documentation are legally required to be inspected prior to registration. Any such initiative in respect of the payment of the tax would require a change to primary legislation and significant changes to IT and administrative structures. Subject to the Government's road map, it is likely that the NCTS Centres will have recommenced a scaled back VRT service by the end of June and any such changes would be disproportionate at this point in time.

I am further informed by Revenue that registration on the Revenue Online Service of new cars and cars that have been pre-inspected has not been interrupted.

The question of insurance is a matter for the insurance industry and that of road tax for the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport.

Vehicle Registration

52. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Finance the schedule for the reopening of the VRT service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5874/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that, in respect of registrations and examinations carried out in the National Car Testing Service Centres, a resumption proposal has been submitted by the Road Safety Authority to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport that would see a limited number of Centres resume on 8 June 2020 for NCT testing. If this resumption proposal is accepted then the VRT service would recommence on a scaled back basis from 29 June 2020. As details become available they will be updated on the Revenue website.

I am further informed by Revenue that registration on the Revenue Online Service of new cars and cars that have been pre-inspected has not been interrupted.

VAT Rate Application

53. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance his views on amending and revising down the VAT rate applicable to the hotel and tourism sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5885/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Government is fully aware of the unprecedented impact that the coronavirus is having on business and people's livelihoods. In this regard a range of measures have been introduced to provide income support to those who need it while also giving confidence to employers to retain the link with employees so that when this crisis passes - and it will pass – our people can get back to work as quickly and seamlessly as possible.

In addition to current support measures, my officials are examining a range of possible measures to ensure that the economy is in a position to recover rapidly while maintaining a stable tax base.

Insurance Coverage

54. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Finance if further engagement has been or is planned to be taken with the insurance industry regarding insurance cover for businesses required to close during the Covid-19 emergency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5922/20]

55. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Finance if he has met with the CEOs of insurance companies to deal with their reluctance to pay business interruption cover; and if so, the progress made on same. [6134/20]

134. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance the measures taken to ensure that insurance companies will cover Covid-19 related business interruption claims; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6974/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 54, 55 and 134 together.

I am aware that there have been many concerns expressed about how the insurance industry is responding to the needs of its business policyholders in these difficult times, in terms of honouring business interruption claims and also with regard to whether forbearance and other flexible measures are being offered to them. In this regard, I held a teleconference meeting with a representative from the Alliance for Insurance Reform on 1 April to hear the concerns of their membership.

I, and my officials, have been engaging with the insurance sector in an effort to get some much needed certainty for business policyholders. On business interruption claims, I wrote to Insurance Ireland on the 27th of March and indicated amongst other things the following:

(i) insurers should not attempt to reject claims on the basis of interpreting policies to their own advantage.

(ii) that where a claim can be made because a business has closed, as a result of a Government direction due to contagious or infectious disease, that the recent Government advice to close a business in the context of COVID-19 should be treated as a direction.

Insurance Ireland, on behalf of its membership, responded on the 3rd of April and stated that it accepted both of my points. It did however indicate that each insurance policy is different and there may well be other factors which lead to the adjudication of whether a business interruption claim is valid or not, other than Government advice to close.

Following on from my correspondence, I held a teleconference with Insurance Ireland, on the 17th of April, where I reiterated that some insurers, by adopting a “blanket” rejection of all business interruption claims, were doing the industry significant reputational damage and were not treating their customers fairly. I also discussed a range of other insurance related matters on the teleconference, including motor insurance premium refunds, and a statement outlining the nature of my engagement with Insurance Ireland was issued by the Department and can be found here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/edabf2-minister-donohoe-emphasises-his-concerns-to-insurance-ireland-regard/>

In addition, the Deputies should note that the Central Bank wrote to the CEOs of major insurers outlining its expectations of them in this crisis from a consumer protection perspective. The key messages that the Bank conveyed are as follows:

- Insurers must put forward consumer-focussed solutions on policy payment breaks, rebates and claims.

- While most insurance policies are clear, if there is a doubt about the meaning of a term, the interpretation most favourable to the consumer should prevail.

- The Central Bank expects the CEOs of Irish authorised firms to take responsibility for the oversight of how their firm is managing determinations of whether claims are covered or not in the context of COVID-19.

I also understand that the Central Bank is continuing to engage with the non-life insurance industry on these matters and will continue to closely monitor the situation to ensure that firms

are meeting the expectations as previously set out.

In conclusion on this issue, I have already set out to the House that I strongly believe that insurers should treat their customers honestly, fairly and professionally and honour those elements of the policies covered including business interruption claims in line with the Central Bank's Consumer Protection Code. The Deputies should note however that neither I, as Minister for Finance, nor the Central Bank have any role in adjudicating on such matters. If there continues to be a disagreement between an insurer and a policyholder, then the appropriate channels for resolving them must be followed i.e. use of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman or litigation.

With regard to the other issue raised on insurance cover for businesses required to close during the Covid-19 emergency, I and my officials have also had extensive engagements with the industry. In that regard, it should be noted that in my letter of the 27th of March, I also requested that Insurance Ireland press its members to provide some reliefs to their customers to alleviate the pressures brought on as a result of the current situation and for insurers to have a common approach on how they are supporting their business customers in this difficult time. The outcome of this engagement is an agreement that I announced on the 10th of April whereby most of the key insurers in the Irish market - namely Allianz, AIG, AXA, FBD, Liberty Insurance, RSA, Travelers Insurance and Zurich - will apply the following common measures which will be available to their business customers:

Forbearance

- Insurers will reduce premiums for business customers to reflect reduced level of exposure as a result of COVID-19 restrictions for Employer Liability/ Public Liability and Commercial Motor.

- Insurers will allow up to 28 days after renewal for payment. **Business Premises**

- Insurers will maintain cover for unoccupied commercial buildings/ premises not in use due to COVID-19 restriction (for a maximum of 90 days). Appropriate supervision and security of the premises is required.

- Insurers will support requests for a change of property use during the crisis.

It is important that businesses contact their insurers or brokers to avail of these offers.

In terms of this agreement, I believe that it should provide some assistance to businesses. I have asked Insurance Ireland to put in place a mechanism, which will provide proof of delivery on these commitments. My view, is that it is in Insurance Ireland's interest to put in place a credible tracking mechanism, as they need to be able to demonstrate that the 10 April agreement is being implemented properly. I have also asked my officials intend to monitor the implementation of the agreement, both through the activity tracker, as well as through the regular engagement with other relevant stakeholders such as the Alliance for Insurance Reform.

Finally, with regard to any further engagement with the insurance industry, it should be noted that my officials are in regular contact with Insurance Ireland and the Central Bank and keep me updated on developments. For now, while I don't have any meeting arranged with individual insurance company CEOs, I am keeping that issue under review as matters develop.

Home Building Finance Ireland

56. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Finance if an application will be reviewed and approved (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6153/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): HBFi was established, in January 2019, to increase the availability of funding for the residential development market. At the time of launch, HBFi offered a Senior Debt funding product for developments of 10 units and above. On 10 May 2020, HBFi released a number of new products, one of which provides funding for smaller commercially viable residential projects, of 5 units or more. Details on all of HBFi's products can be found on their website at www.hbfi.ie/.

While I am advised that HBFi are very happy to discuss and consider the funding of all residential developments, it should be noted that the minimum number of units for which HBFi currently provides funding is 5 or more.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

57. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance the number of workers on the WSS whose earnings are below €205 and €350, respectively. [6156/20]

84. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance the number of employers, registered for tax purposes as offshore, that have availed of the wage subsidy scheme; and the cost of the scheme in these cases. [5960/20]

85. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance the number of transnational corporations availing of the wage subsidy scheme; the number of their employees on the scheme; and the sectors of industry in which they operate. [5961/20]

92. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance the number of employees who have been placed on the wage subsidy scheme and whose earnings are below €350 from this scheme and are not in receipt of any top-up from their employer; and the amount of weekly subsidy these workers receive from the scheme in bands below €350 (details supplied). [6158/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 57, 84, 85 and 92 together.

In relation to the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), since 9 April 2020 Revenue has published statistics on the operation of the TWSS on a regular basis. On 14 May, Revenue published updated and expanded statistical information in relation to the scheme. All of these statistics are available on Revenue's website www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/number-of-taxpayers-and-returns/covid-19-wage-subsidy-scheme-statistics.aspx.

The data published include the cost of the scheme to date as well as detailed information on employers and employees in receipt of payments under the scheme.

As at 14 May, Revenue report that:

- There are over 53,900 employers registered with Revenue for the TWSS.
- Over 47,300 employers have already received subsidy payments under the TWSS.
- Over 464,400 employees have already received at least one payment under the TWSS.
- The cumulative value of payments made under the TWSS is €936 million.

Regarding the Deputy's question on the number of employers, registered for tax purposes as off-shore that have availed of the wage subsidy scheme; and the cost of the scheme in these cases; the TWSS is only available to employers registered in Ireland that had employees included on their Irish payroll in February 2020 and whose business activities are being adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The scheme does not apply to the public service or non-commercial semi-state sector.

Regarding the Deputy's question on the number of transnational corporations availing of the wage subsidy scheme; the number of their employees on the scheme; and the sectors of industry in which they operate, the available information at the above link includes the proportions of employers and employees assigned to Revenue's Large Corporates Division that are currently availing of TWSS (0.7% of employers and 14.6% of employees), many of these employers are likely to be multinational companies. Sectoral breakdowns of TWSS employers and employees are also included in the statistics.

Regarding the Deputy's question on the number of workers on TWSS whose earnings are below €205 and €350, respectively, the information published at the above link shows the available wage distribution for TWSS employees (Table 5 of the 14 May statistics, for example).

Finally, regarding the Deputy's question on the number of employees that have been placed on the wage subsidy scheme; and whose earnings are below €350 from the scheme; and are not in receipt of any top-up from their employer; and the amount of weekly subsidy these workers receive from the scheme in bands below €350, Table 11 in the statistics of 23 April, 30 April and 7 May and Table 6 in the 14 May statistics (all published at the link above) includes the available analysis of employer 'top-up' payments to employees.

Revenue has advised me that it is continuing to undertake further analysis of TWSS and will publish updated and expanded statistics on a regular basis. These updates will also be published at the link above.

Real Estate Investment Trusts

58. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether it is an appropriate time to re-evaluate the special arrangements that entities such as REITs enjoy (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6273/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Finance Act 2013 introduced the regime for the operation of Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) in Ireland. The function of the REIT framework is not to provide an overall tax exemption but rather to facilitate collective investment in rental property by removing a double layer of taxation which would otherwise apply on property investment via a corporate vehicle.

A number of amendments were made to the taxation of REITs as part of Finance Act 2019, to ensure the regime operates as intended. The obligation to deduct REIT Dividend Withholding Tax was extended to include distributions of the proceeds of capital disposals. New measures were introduced to require the proceeds of property disposals to be re-invested in property assets or distributed within a set period. The deemed disposal provisions upon cessation of REIT status were restricted to REITs that have been in operation for at least 15 years, in line with the regime's stated objective of encouraging long-term, stable investment in rental property. Finance Act 2019 also introduced the "wholly and exclusively" test when calculating the REIT profits available for distribution. This test is common throughout the taxes act, its inclusion in the REIT legislation ensures fair and consistent treatment for those investing in

Irish property.

The Deputy may be aware that that my officials prepared a report on Real Estate Investment Trusts, Irish Real Estate Funds and section 110 companies as they invest in the Irish property market in 2019. This report was completed and presented to the Tax Strategy Group in July 2019 and informed the changes introduced in Finance Act 2019, referred to above. I therefore do not believe it to be an appropriate time to conduct a further review of the REIT regime, however I can confirm that my Department actively monitors developments in the property market on an ongoing basis. The aforementioned report can be viewed at the following link: <https://assets.gov.ie/19114/2de9c469825a47418526e1d5c217b44c.pdf>.

In relation to the further details supplied, it is not appropriate for the Minister for Finance to comment on the remuneration of specific individuals.

Tax Collection

59. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Finance if he has given consideration to the temporary suspension of the collection of professional withholding tax from payments made to dentists contracted by the HSE and the Department to treat medical card and PRSI eligible patients, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6919/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that Professional Services Withholding Tax (PSWT) is a deduction at source that is applied to certain payments made by bodies listed in legislation to professional service providers. Tax is deducted at the standard income tax rate, currently 20%. It should be noted that PSWT is not an additional tax. It is instead a payment on account, which is set against the final Income Tax or Corporation Tax liability of the service provider. This is the basis on which PSWT is applied to payments made by the HSE to dentists for the provision of dental services.

There is a wide range of bodies which deduct PSWT and an equally wide range of payments for professional services to which it applies. In these circumstances, it would not be appropriate to suspend the operation of PSWT by one entity for the provision of one particular service.

However, the legislation governing PSWT does provide for the Revenue to make interim refunds, in specified circumstances, within the same tax year as that in which the PSWT is deducted.

I am further advised by Revenue that special arrangements have been put in place to accelerate the processing of interim refunds during the Covid-19 pandemic.

These new arrangements provide for the submission of these claims electronically through Revenue's MyEnquiries service and this will speed up the provision of refunds to applicants.

To accelerate interim refunds of PSWT Revenue will accept refund claims via MyEnquiries where legible copies of the original F45 and F50 documents are attached. Refunds will be processed on this basis without the requirement to be supported by original F45 documents. All original F45 documents will need to be retained as there will be checks at a future date.

Additionally and in a situation where the relevant F45 form cannot be issued to the specified person due solely to the current Covid-19 circumstances then, for the purposes of attachment to a MyEnquiries refund claim, a written statement issued by the accountable person to the specified person setting out the relevant information will suffice.

Full details of these Covid-19 interim arrangements are available on the Revenue website at www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/communications/covid19/revenue-services.aspx.

All requests for refunds will be given priority attention once received by Revenue

Departmental Contracts

60. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department has engaged the use of external consultants from 1 January 2020 to date; the details and costs of such engagements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5530/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): My department regularly publishes details of consultancy expenditure on its website, most recently for Q1 2020.

The following table outlines the detail and costs of my department's engagement of external consultants from 1 January 2020 to date.

Supplier:	The details of such engagements:	Costs:
Indecon International Economic Consultants	This payment is for an independent report conducted by Indecon entitled the Evaluation of Concept of Community Banking in Ireland. The report concludes that there is no business case for the State to establish a public banking system in Ireland, supporting the outcome of a previous report on this issue published by the Department of Finance and the Department of Rural and Community Development in 2018.	133,393.50
Fitzpatrick Associates	Credit Demand SurveyThe bi-annual Credit Demand Survey is an independent and statistically significant report into the Irish SME landscape and the availability of, and demand for, credit. The full cost of the survey is recouped from participating banks.	73,738.50
Language Communications	This payment is for hosting the www.switchyourbank.ie website for 2020. The Switch your Bank campaign is a public awareness campaign to raise awareness and promote customer switching of financial products and is facilitated by the Department of Finance as part of its remit to ensure that consumers are protected within the financial sector in Ireland. The cost of the Switch your Bank campaign is fully recoupable by AIB and Permanent TSB in the context of their restructuring plans.	2,066.40
A&L Goodbody Solicitors	Legal advice	15,990.00
William Fry	Legal advice	117,374.60
William Fry	Legal advice	8,601.39
	Total	351,164.39

Supplier:	Consultancies engaged but not completed/invoiced yet	Cost
RSM Ireland	Liquidation cost/outcome review	Nil to date
NM Rothschild & Sons Ltd	To act as independent Financial Advisor in relation to the State's remaining banking investments.	Nil to date

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

61. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the specific issues with the wage subsidy scheme and the attempts of a person (details supplied) to now reopen their businesses post Covid-19; if he will draw the attention of the Revenue Commissioners to the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5620/20]

74. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to an issue that has arisen for some employers in accessing the temporary wage subsidy scheme in which employers that rehired staff previously let go after 1 May 2020 seem to be unable to qualify for a refund; if these employers will be refunded; and if so, the timeframe that businesses can expect for this. [5881/20]

77. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Finance if a reply will issue to concerns raised in correspondence from a person (details supplied) in respect of possible problems in creating the necessary supports for businesses to restart operations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5897/20]

108. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Finance the reason employees rehired after 1 May 2020 will not be eligible for refunding under the wage subsidy scheme despite the reopening plan only being published at 7pm on 1 May 2020; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that employers could not have rehired prior to that due of the lack of knowledge prior to that time; his views on whether such a limitation will leave persons on the pandemic unemployment payment in spite of the wish to move persons from this payment to the wage subsidy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6426/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 61, 74, 77 and 108 together.

The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is provided for in section 28 of the recently enacted Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020. Of necessity, the legislation and the scheme itself were developed very quickly to support the urgent Government objective of getting much needed assistance to employers and employees that have been seriously affected by the pandemic.

The TWSS builds on data returned to Revenue through its real-time PAYE system. The changes to Revenue's systems required to fully implement the TWSS have been delivered incrementally since the scheme commenced on 26 March 2020. The latest phase of the scheme implements the revised subsidy rates, as determined by me, in accordance with the legislation and is effective from 4 May 2020 for most employees. This phase is based on providing employers with details of the maximum personal subsidy amount to be paid to individual employees based on their previous average net weekly pay.

Revenue advise me that it is aware of the difficulty for employers in accessing TWSS in respect of staff that were rehired after 1 May 2020 and has assured me that it is not related to ceasing employees from the scheme. The implementation of the latest phase of TWSS required a series of calculations to be performed for each employee that was on employers' payrolls on 1 May 2020 in order to generate their personal wage subsidy entitlements. Employees who were rehired after 1 May 2020 could not be included in these initial calculations and consequently Revenue is temporarily unable to provide the necessary personalised wage subsidy entitlements information to employers in respect of these persons.

I have been assured by Revenue that it is actively working on an IT systems development to facilitate access to TWSS for rehired employees. It is anticipated that the development will be implemented in the coming weeks and will be retrospective to the date of rehiring.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

62. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Finance if, further to the Revenue Commissioners announcement of 24 April 2020 allowing access to temporary wage subsidy scheme for certain employers that missed 15 March 2020 payroll deadline, those businesses granted access to the scheme will be paid retrospectively in respect of wages paid in the intervening period of the scheme opening and their access to it. [5629/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is an emergency measure to deal with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy. The scheme builds on data returned to Revenue through its real-time PAYE system. It must be accepted that the underlying legislation and the scheme itself simply cannot be tailored to meet every individual unique set of circumstances for either employers or employees. The core principles of the scheme, as prescribed in the underlying law, are that the business is suffering significant negative economic impact due to the pandemic, that the employees were on the payroll on 29 February 2020 and that the employer had fulfilled its PAYE reporting obligations for February 2020 by, in general, 15 March 2020. These requirements of the scheme were critical safeguards against abuse and exploitation of the scheme.

I have been advised by Revenue that following a review of cases since the TWSS commenced, it became apparent that a number of employers had been unable to access the scheme because they failed the 15 March 2020 rule but had qualified under all other conditions of the scheme and are otherwise tax compliant. Given the overarching purpose and objective of the scheme, Revenue announced on 24 April, under its care and management provisions, to allow such employers access the scheme provided:

- the employees in respect of whom the wage subsidy is claimed were included on the employer's payroll on 29 February 2020,
- the February 2020 payroll submissions were submitted to Revenue before 1 April 2020, and
- the payroll submissions for all previous months were submitted to Revenue before 15 March 2020.

Where a business qualifies for the scheme under the revised criteria and makes the necessary declaration that it is significantly impacted by the crisis, the wage subsidies under the scheme will be payable for eligible employees in respect of payroll submissions made on or after 24 April 2020, with a pay date on or after 24 April 2020. However, subsidies for the earlier period are not made retrospectively and there are no plans to alter this.

Ministerial Meetings

63. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Finance if concerns (details supplied) will be investigated; if there will be greater assistance in areas such as VAT and employer's PRSI; and if he will meet with an organisation to discuss these issues. [5646/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Government is fully aware of the unprecedented impact that the coronavirus is having on business and people's livelihoods. In this regard a range of measures have been introduced to provide income support to those who need it while also giving confidence to employers to retain the link with employees so that when this crisis passes - and it will pass – our people can get back to work as quickly and seamlessly as possible.

In addition to current support measures, my officials are examining a range of possible measures to ensure that the economy is in a position to recover rapidly while maintaining a stable tax base.

Question No. 64 answered with Question No. 45.

Financial Services Sector

65. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Finance if zero interest loan schemes for SMEs are being considered to bridge liquidity difficulties for businesses following the confirmation that banks can now borrow from the ECB at a negative rate of 0.75%. [5675/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As part of the Targeted Longer-Term Refinancing Operation (TLTRO), banks can borrow from the Eurosystem at favourable terms to incentivise eligible lending to businesses and households. As of 30 April, the Governing Council of the ECB has set the entry rate on the TLTRO programme to be -0.5%. The interest rate then decreases on a scale depending on developments in a bank's eligible lending. The minimum rate on the borrowing can be as low as -1% if a bank exceeds its lending benchmark for eligible lending.

Access to TLTRO funding is available to banks across the euro area, including to Irish banks, but is optional and is a decision for a bank itself to make. Up to now, take-up from Irish banks in previous TLTRO programs has been limited. Importantly, the TLTRO program does not specify the interest rate at which the bank lending to business (or households) should take place. However, banks do not just use TLTRO to fund their activity. In practice they utilise a diverse range of funding sources, including consumer deposits, which are relatively more expensive for the bank compared to the funding available under TLTRO.

Neither the Central Bank of Ireland, the ECB, nor the Government plays a role in determining the interest rate on a loan from a private bank in Ireland. However, one would always expect a spread above borrowing costs to reflect various costs associated with lending, such as credit risk premia, operating costs including credit assessment, and the cost of equity. All of these factors are particularly high in the Irish SME lending market. Banks are also required to hold an adequate level of capital against SME lending this also contributes to the interest rates charged by banks.

Separately, banks are offering a payment break up to six months for business and personal customers affected by Covid-19. A payment break as a response to COVID-19 is not identified specifically on credit reports. If a lender agrees to a payment break with no payments at all, then

no “missed payments” will be submitted to the Central Credit Register by the lender during this period.

The Government has put in place a suite of measures to assist SMEs during these difficult times. These include measures to help viable businesses access the liquidity that they require. There is a range of Government supports available through the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland. €200 million is currently available for COVID 19 affected customers through the SBCI COVID19 Working Capital Scheme. The Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Heather Humphreys TD, has recently announced the expansion of two SBCI Loan Schemes by €450m to provide an extra €250m for working capital and €200m for longer-term loans, bringing the total allocation to support liquidity in companies affected by the COVID-19 crisis to €650m. The SBCI also has existing supports in place that can help SMEs, including the Credit Guarantee Scheme, which has current lending capacity for SMEs. The Credit Guarantee Scheme supports lending through the provision of an 80% Government Guarantee for qualifying businesses. The Microfinance Ireland Loan Scheme has also introduced loans of up to €50,000 for micro-SMEs affected by COVID 19. The expansion of Microfinance Ireland funding by €13m to €20m for COVID-19 loans has also been recently announced with interest rates falling from 7.8% to 4.5%. The Government also recently announced a 2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme to support lending to SMEs for terms ranging from 3 months to 6 years, which will be below market interest rates.

Proposed Legislation

66. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Finance the details of each legislative change that will be needed for all items announced on 2 May 2020 (details supplied). [5676/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): In respect of the measures to which the Deputy refers and for which my Department is responsible, I am advised by Revenue that the effective “warehousing” of VAT and PAYE (Employer) liabilities is currently operational. In March this year, Revenue announced that it was suspending debt collection and the charging of interest on late payment for the January/February and March/April 2020 VAT periods and the February, March and April 2020 PAYE (Employer) periods. On 7 May 2020, Revenue announced the extension of these arrangements to include the May/June 2020 VAT period and May and June 2020 PAYE (Employer) liabilities. These measures are being operated by Revenue on an administrative basis under the care and management provisions of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997.

However, primary legislation will be required to put the measures on a statutory footing and to provide for the appropriate rate of interest to be changed on the warehoused debts, namely:

- 0% for the “Covid-19 restricted trading phase”, the period when the business is unable to trade due to the Covid-19 related restrictions, and including the first two months after the business resumes “normal” trading;

- 0% for the “zero interest” phase, which lasts for 12 months after the end of the first phase;

- 3% per annum for the “reduced interest phase”, which begins after the end of the second phase.

The necessary legislative amendments to the relevant provisions of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 and the Value Added Tax Consolidation Act 2010 will be brought forward in due course. Further information on tax debts warehousing is available on the Revenue website here.

The Deputy may wish to note that the establishment of the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF) Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund will not require statutory amendment. ISIF will complete a revised investment strategy (under section 40 of the National Treasury Management Agency (Amendment) Act 2014) over the coming weeks.

I can also advise the Deputy that my colleague, the Minister for Business, Enterprise, and Innovation, will be bringing forward legislation to implement the €2 billion Credit Guarantee Scheme, which will support lending to SMEs for terms ranging from 3 months to 6 years at below market interest rates.

Mortgage Applications Approvals

67. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance if banks are refusing mortgages to customers that are still employed but on the temporary Covid-19 wage subsidy scheme (details supplied). [5689/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The European Union (Consumer Mortgage Credit Agreements) Regulations 2016 (CMCAR) provide that, before concluding a mortgage credit agreement, a lender must make a thorough assessment of the consumer's creditworthiness. The assessment must take appropriate account of factors relevant to verifying the prospect of the consumer being able to meet his or her obligations under the credit agreement. The CMCAR also provides that a lender should only make credit available to a consumer where the result of the creditworthiness assessment indicates that the consumer's obligations resulting from the credit agreement are likely to be met in the manner required under that agreement. The assessment of creditworthiness must be carried out on the basis of information on the consumer's income and expenses and other financial and economic circumstances which is necessary, sufficient and proportionate. In addition, the Central Bank's Consumer Protection Code 2012 imposes 'Knowing the Consumer and Suitability' requirements on lenders. Under these requirements, 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 Central Bank has indicated that it expects all regulated firms to take a consumer-focused approach and to act in their customers' best interests at all times, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, within the parameters of the regulatory framework as set out above, the decision to grant or refuse an individual application for mortgage credit is a commercial decision to be made by the regulated entity. A loan offer may contain a condition that the lender can withdraw or vary the offer if in the lender's opinion there is any material change in circumstances prior to drawdown. In such cases, the decision to withdraw or vary the offer is a commercial decision for the lender. Neither the Central Bank nor I can become involved in such decision making.

Lenders have indicated that they continue to process mortgage applications and have supports in place to assist customers impacted by COVID-19. Customers should consult the BPF's COVID-19 Support FAQ on mortgages, or contact their lender directly, if they have any queries or concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on their mortgage application.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

68. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Finance if there is a delay in approving the grant for vehicles for transport under the drivers and passengers scheme during the Covid-19 crisis; and the reason for the delay in the case of a person (details supplied). [5793/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that there is currently no delay in processing applications under the Drivers and Passengers with Disabilities Scheme or the associated Fuel Grant Scheme. The processing of applications for the latter scheme is administered by Revenue on behalf of the Department of Finance, which makes the relevant payments.

Revenue has however confirmed that the changes introduced in the Finance Act to increase the rate of fuel grant, required some IT development work, which led to initial delays earlier this year.

An application for the Fuel Grant was received from the person in question on 15 January 2020. This application was processed and forwarded to the Department of Finance for payment on 2 March 2020 and was paid as part of the fuel grant payment process in March 2020.

Departmental Correspondence

69. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Finance if a reply will to issue to correspondence from a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5828/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Government is fully aware of the unprecedented impact that the coronavirus is having on business and people's livelihoods. In this regard a range of measures have been introduced to provide income support to those who need it while also giving confidence to employers to retain the link with employees so that when this crisis passes - and it will pass – our people can get back to work as quickly and seamlessly as possible.

In addition to current support measures, my officials are examining a range of possible measures to ensure that the economy is in a position to recover rapidly while maintaining a stable tax base.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

70. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that some mortgage providers are blocking any mortgage payment moratorium necessitated by job losses due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5867/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy will be aware, the BPFi announced late last month that over 65,000 mortgage payment breaks had been granted since the cross-bank initiative was introduced. The members of the BPFi announced on 30 April, that a further three-month extension to the current payment break will be made available to customers that continue to be directly impacted by the fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic.

I have been advised by the Central Bank of Ireland (the Central Bank) that it continues to work with regulated entities to ensure the fair treatment of customers who find themselves in financial difficulties due to the exceptional circumstances of COVID-19. Payment breaks give borrowers affected by COVID-19 the opportunity to postpone or substantially reduce their repayments at a time of stress. It is clear that these payment breaks are necessary for many borrowers to enable them to deal with the immediate shock that they are experiencing. Through its ongoing engagement with the BPFi and the credit union representative bodies, the Central Bank

is working to ensure that affected borrowers are supported through this unprecedented stress. The Central Bank expects regulated entities to clearly explain to their customers who wish to avail of a payment break, the implications of a payment break and all other existing protections that apply to borrowers facing financial difficulty, including forbearance, and to engage appropriately. Payment breaks should be a generally available option to affected borrowers, including those borrowers currently meeting the terms of alternative repayment arrangements. In this regard, regulated entities should ensure approaches are consistent with any existing arrears strategies and operations.

The Central Bank has emphasised that the provisions of the existing consumer protection framework, which is designed to ensure that consumers' best interests are protected, particularly in times of financial difficulties, are in place.

If the customer is not happy with the way their financial institution is dealing with them, they can make a complaint to them and if they are not satisfied with the response received from them, the customer has the option to bring a complaint to the independent Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman.

Revenue Commissioners

71. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Finance if the J9 stamp being used by the Revenue Commissioners to process the wage subsidy scheme will be treated as paid contributions for employees under the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5868/20]

114. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Finance if he is satisfied that the terms of the wage subsidy scheme are such that in circumstances in which a PRSI credit has been applied for the duration of the scheme by an employer in respect of an employee that the social protection or pension contributions of that employee are not diminished particularly when retirement of the employee will take place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6571/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 71 and 114 together.

The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is operational from 26 March 2020 for payrolls submitted to Revenue with a pay date on or after that date. For operational reasons, in order to claim the wage subsidy, employers must classify qualifying employees as PRSI Class J9 for the purposes of their payroll reporting obligations. Employer's PRSI is reduced from 11.05% to 0.5% and no employee PRSI applies in the case of the employees in question.

I have already indicated in the House, in response to a question from Deputy Nash, that it is the intention of the Government to ensure that employees who are participating in the TWSS do not have their social insurance contributions adversely affected as a result of the use of the PRSI Class J9 arrangement. I understand that the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection is looking at legislative proposals to address this issue.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

72. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider an adjustment to the Covid-19 wage subsidy payment to allow for more flexibility to include those workers that

had just commenced employment in the weeks prior to the crisis; if the average wage calculation for those workers could be calculated on a period other than January to February; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5871/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The legislation underpinning the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is contained in Section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020. Of necessity, the legislation and the scheme itself were developed very quickly to support the urgent Government objective of getting much needed assistance to employers and employees that have been seriously affected by the pandemic.

The TWSS builds on data returned to Revenue through its real-time PAYE system. It must be accepted that the underlying legislation and the scheme itself simply cannot be tailored to meet every individual unique set of circumstances for either employers or employees.

The core principles of the scheme, as prescribed in the underlying law, are that –

- the business is suffering significant negative economic impact due to the pandemic,
- the employees were on the payroll at 29 February 2020, and
- the employer had fulfilled its PAYE reporting obligations for February 2020 by 15 March 2020

The changes to Revenue's systems required to fully implement the TWSS have been delivered incrementally since the scheme commenced on 26 March 2020. The latest phase of the scheme implements the revised subsidy rates, as determined by me, in accordance with the legislation and is effective from 4 May 2020 for most employees. This phase is based on providing employers with details of the maximum personal subsidy amount to be paid to individual employees based on their previous average net weekly pay.

On 15 April 2020, I, as Minister for Finance, announced further updates to the TWSS. Included in the updates were measures to increase the wage subsidy for certain lower paid employees. In effect, for those employees with previous net pay of less than €586 per week, the amount of the temporary wage subsidy shall not exceed €410 per week in accordance with the following principles:

- an 85% subsidy shall be payable in the case of employees whose average net weekly pay does not exceed €412; and
- a flat rate subsidy of up to €350 shall be payable in the case of employees whose average net weekly pay is more than €412 but not more than €500.

In addition, where an employer wishes to pay a greater level of top-up, in respect of employees with net pay of less than €412 per week, in order to bring the employee's pay to €350 per week, then tapering would not be applied to the subsidy.

These changes to the TWSS mean that more employees will now receive a subsidy of €350 per week, and those with previous net pay below €412 per week will now receive a greater level of subsidy.

These new rates have been fully operational for payroll submissions made on or after 4 May 2020, with a pay date on or after that same date.

The changes announced allow the concentration of resources to protect incomes, in a proportionate way having regard to available resources, employer contribution and the broader suite of COVID-19 related supports put in place by the Government.

Currently, I have no plans to change the average wage calculation to a different period.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

73. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Finance if an application (details supplied) for the temporary wage subsidy scheme previously disallowed due to an administrative error will be reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5875/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is an emergency measure to deal with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy. The underlying legislation and the scheme itself were developed within a very short timeframe to support the urgent Government objective of getting much needed assistance to employers and employees, where businesses have been seriously affected by the necessary restrictions introduced to fight the pandemic. The purpose of the scheme is to ensure that the relationship between employers and employees is maintained to the greatest extent possible so that businesses can restart operations quickly once that is possible.

The TWSS builds on data returned to Revenue through its real-time PAYE System and is based on each employee's average net weekly pay. The average net weekly pay is calculated from the information contained in payroll submissions reported by the employer to Revenue for January and February 2020 pay dates. The core principles of the scheme, as set out in the legislation are that:

- the business is suffering significant negative economic impact due to the pandemic,
- the employees were on the payroll at 29 February 2020, and
- the employer had fulfilled its PAYE reporting obligations for February 2020 by 15 March 2020.

Revenue recently amended the 15 March 2020 eligibility deadline for the February payroll submission to 'before' 1 April 2020 under its care and management provisions. This concession applies where all earlier returns were submitted before 15 March 2020. These requirements are critical safeguards against abuse and exploitation of the scheme.

Revenue has advised me that the weekly payroll submissions for February 2020 in respect of the business in question were not received until 16 April 2020, which is outside of the revised 'before' 1 April 2020 deadline. Revenue has further confirmed that the January 2020 payroll submissions were also not received until 16 April 2020 and that over the course of 2019, payroll submissions were generally not received within the required deadlines.

Revenue further advise me that it is for these reasons that the business cannot access the TWSS and that it is not possible for Revenue to design systems that will allow entry to the scheme where the inbuilt eligibility thresholds have not been adhered to.

Question No. 74 answered with Question No. 61.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

75. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Finance if a case (details supplied) will be examined in which a company is unable to access the temporary wage subsidy scheme. [5883/20]

82. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Finance if the case of a company (details supplied) will be investigated. [5937/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 75 and 82 together.

I am advised by Revenue that all cases which have applied for refunds under the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) and which were rejected on the basis of failing to meet the eligibility criteria are reviewed by Revenue.

The TWSS builds on data returned to Revenue through its real-time PAYE system. It must be accepted that the underlying legislation and the scheme itself simply cannot be tailored to meet every individual unique set of circumstances for either employers or employees. The core principles of the scheme, as prescribed in the underlying law, are that –

- the business is suffering significant negative economic impact due to the pandemic,
- the employees were on the payroll at 29 February 2020, and
- the employer had fulfilled its PAYE reporting obligations for February 2020 by 15 March 2020.

Accordingly, the TWSS can only operate in respect of an employee, whether full-time or part-time, who was on the payroll of the employer as at 29 February 2020. Thus, where an employer has not met its statutory PAYE reporting obligations for February 2020 by 15 March 2020, then the employer is not eligible to participate in the scheme. These requirements of the TWSS were critical safeguards against abuse and exploitation of the scheme. PAYE legislation requires employers to report their payroll to Revenue in real time as the payroll is run. Thus, employers are obliged to report the tax and PRSI deducted from their employees' wages in real time.

Arising from the ongoing review of specific cases since the TWSS started, I am advised by Revenue that it became apparent that a number of employers were unable to access the scheme because they failed the 15 March 2020 rule but had qualified under all other conditions of the scheme and are otherwise tax compliant. Given the purpose of the scheme to maintain the link between the employee and employer, Revenue decided, under its care and management provisions, to allow such employers access to the scheme, provided:

- the employees in respect of whom the wage subsidy is claimed were included on the employer's payroll on 29 February 2020,
- the February 2020 payroll submissions were submitted to Revenue before 1 April 2020, and
- the payroll submissions for all previous months were submitted to Revenue before 15 March 2020.

Having regard to the particular circumstances of the case, involving a significant interruption caused by a suspected COVID-19 outbreak, following further engagement between the business concerned and Revenue, and in recognition of the positive compliance record of the business concerned, I am advised by Revenue that it approved the business for the purposes of the operation of the TWSS.

Vehicle Registration

76. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Finance when certificates in respect of an imported vehicle (details supplied) will be dealt with; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5892/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that to register an imported used car, a person must bring the ‘foreign registration certificate’ or ‘certificate of de-registration’ (issued by the relevant registration authority in the other State) to the National Car Testing Service (NCTS) centre. In the context of the United Kingdom (UK), the required document is a ‘V5C’.

The procedures for registering a used vehicle and the documents required are clearly set out on Revenue’s website at www.revenue.ie/en/importing-vehicles-duty-free-allowances/guide-to-vrt/vehicle-registration-tax/procedure-at-the-ncts-centre.aspx and are also available on the NCTS website at <https://www.ncts.ie/1155>.

While the ‘V5C’ remains the key document for registration of a vehicle that has been imported into the State from the UK, Revenue may on a concessional basis, allow for alternative documentation to be presented in certain limited circumstances. Revenue has confirmed that it will make direct contact with the person in question to resolve the matter.

Question No. 77 answered with Question No. 61.

Insurance Coverage

78. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the practice of insurance companies requesting engineers’ certificates before offering quotes to potential customers; the circumstances in which this practice might be appropriate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5907/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I understand that the Deputy’s question is in relation to motor insurance. At the outset you should note that neither I, as Minister for Finance, nor the Central Bank of Ireland can interfere in the provision or pricing of insurance products or have the power to direct insurance companies to provide cover to specific individuals or businesses. This position is reinforced by the EU framework for insurance (the Solvency II Directive) which expressly prohibits Member States from doing so. Consequently, I am not in a position to direct insurance companies as to the pricing level or terms or conditions that they should apply in respect of particular categories of vehicles.

I understand that in making their individual decisions on whether to offer cover and what terms to apply, insurers use a combination of rating factors, such as the age of the driver, the age and type of vehicle, the relevant individual claims record and driving experience of the driver, the number of drivers, and how the car is used. Insurers will price in accordance with their own overall past claims experience.

With regard to the scenario in the Deputy’s question, I understand that there may be circumstances where an insurer may ask for an additional engineer’s certificate, for example if a vehicle has ever been modified or been repaired by an unofficial mechanic following an accident, etc.. While there may be a view that because a vehicle has a valid NCT certificate that such a report would not be necessary, it should be noted that insurers will generally require as a minimum that a car has a valid NCT in order to be covered. Accordingly, they will generally reserve the right to ask for additional information if they think it appropriate.

In summary, the requirements that insurers make of individual potential policyholders, and

the prices they offer, differ across the market – which is why it is so important – as the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission website (www.ccpc.ie/consumers/money/insurance/) recommends, to “shop around” and “always get quotes from several insurance providers when you need to get or renew insurance”.

Finally, as you may already be aware, Insurance Ireland, the representative body for insurance providers in this country, operates an Insurance Information Service for those who have queries, complaints or difficulties in relation to obtaining insurance, which can be accessed at: feedback@insuranceireland.eu.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

79. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Finance if the case of a company (details supplied) will be investigated. [5909/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Government’s priority in commencing the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is to ensure that all employers experiencing significant negative economic disruption from COVID-19 can receive support payments as quickly as possible. The purpose of the scheme is to ensure that the relationship between employers and employees is maintained to the greatest extent possible so that businesses can restart operations quickly once that is possible.

TWSS builds on data returned to Revenue through the PAYE system and as such is a fully automated solution. The TWSS, which was developed in a very short timeframe in response to the pandemic is designed around the dates specified in the legislation. The legal timelines are that employees were on the employer payroll at 29 February 2020 and that the employer had fulfilled its PAYE reporting obligations for February 2020 before 15 March 2020. Revenue recently revised the eligibility conditions for the scheme under its care and management provisions, which extended the 15 March 2020 deadline to ‘before’ 1 April 2020. However, these concessionary arrangements can only operate for future payrolls and are not available on a retrospective basis for previous payrolls.

Revenue has advised me that the business in question could not previously access the TWSS because of amendments to its February payroll after 15 March 2020. However, the business has access to the scheme under the revised concessionary criteria. Revenue has confirmed to me that it has made direct contact with the business to clarify the position.

Retail Sector

80. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Finance if a response will issue to a matter raised by a group (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5917/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Government greatly appreciates the additional efforts of essential workers, front line staff and all those working during this difficult time.

They are making a vital contribution to the State-wide response to the COVID-19 crisis.

However, currently, available resources are being focused on new initiatives to support those who are no longer in employment or who will have reduced income in the coming weeks and months as well as measures seeking to support employers in retaining staff on the payroll.

Commencement of Legislation

81. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Finance the stages required in order to commence the Consumer Insurance Contracts Act 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5921/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Consumer Insurance Contracts Act 2019 was signed into law by the President on 26 December 2019. The Act provides the Minister for Finance with powers to appoint a date for the Act to come into operation, or to appoint different days to commence different provisions of the Act.

At the end of January, I took the decision that the matter of when to commence the Act should be taken by the next Government. The background to this decision was a series of meetings with the major insurers where significant concerns were expressed about the early implementation of certain aspects of the Act. Specifically, it was indicated to me that sufficient time would be needed in relation to the implementation of Sections 8 (Pre-contractual duties of consumer and insurer) and Section 12 (Renewal of contract of insurance). In addition, Sections 9 (Proportionate remedies for misrepresentation) and 14 (Duties of consumer and insurer at renewal) are sufficiently interrelated with Section 8 that it is reasonable to consider that the concerns expressed also apply to these sections. Moreover, the Deputy should note that a general view was expressed by insurers that they also needed a number of months to prepare themselves for the implementation of the sections other than those referred to above.

My officials have advised me that the sector has indicated to them that if insurers are not provided with sufficient time to implement the requirements necessary to fulfil the obligations of the above mentioned sections, they may be forced to withdraw certain products from the market in order to prioritise others so as to ensure that they are fully compliant with the law. Officials understand that such a development would most likely to impact the employer/public liability part of the market. While conscious of the sector's concerns, officials have emphasised to Insurance Ireland the importance of the need for ongoing preparation by the sector for the ultimate commencement of this Act, either on a phased basis or in full.

Consequently, as I believe that this matter is one to be considered after the formation of the next Government, I cannot currently give any indication of a likely timeline for the commencement of this Act, on a phased basis or in full.

Question No. 82 answered with Question No. 75.

Property Tax Collection

83. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance if he will instruct the Revenue Commissioners to defer collection of the LPT from those affected by the Covid-19 crisis, that is, those on the pandemic unemployment payment or in the wage subsidy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5959/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy is aware, I do not have the authority to instruct the Revenue Commissioners to defer the collection of any tax that is legally collectible, including Local Property Tax (LPT), from those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am, however, aware that Revenue has already deferred payment of LPT for residential

property owners that meet their 2020 liability through the 'annual debit instruction' (ADI) payment method, from 21 March to 21 July 2020. I am also aware that Revenue has not initiated any debt collection action against LPT non-payers since the COVID-19 crisis began.

Revenue has advised me that any residential property owners that are experiencing financial difficulties arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and are concerned about meeting their LPT liabilities can amend their current payment arrangement by logging on to their online account at www.ros.ie/myaccount-web/sign_in.html?execution=e1s1.

Alternatively they can engage directly with Revenue via the LPT portal on the Revenue website at <https://lpt.revenue.ie/lpt-web/views/login.html?execution=e1s1> or by post to LPT Branch, PO Box 1, Limerick. Revenue has assured me that it will make every effort to assist residential property owners experiencing financial difficulties to the greatest extent possible.

Questions Nos. 84 and 85 answered with Question No. 57.

Departmental Contracts

86. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance if payments or expenses are being paid to a person (details supplied) for services provided during the Covid-19 crisis to the Government and An Taoiseach. [5962/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Department of Finance has no record of payments or expenses being made to the person named in the PQ for services provided during the Covid-19 crisis. I wish to note that my response refers only to Department of Finance records and I cannot comment on behalf of other Government Departments.

Pension Levy

87. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Finance if consideration has been given to removing or altering the levy applied to occupational pensions of those who worked in semi-State companies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5975/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The pension fund levy was introduced in 2011 in the wake of the financial crash and at a time when the economy was in serious difficulties. Urgent action needed to be taken to preserve and boost jobs and it is an unavoidable fact that difficult economic situations require hard and very often unpopular decisions. All sectors of the economy had to contribute to the recovery plan and the levy was designed to claw back a small amount of the very generous tax reliefs that those contributing to pension arrangements had benefitted from over many years. The levy went to fund the tax reductions and expenditure measures introduced in the Jobs Initiative, including lowering the VAT rate for the tourism sector to 9%. The levy was successful and did its job as reflected in the increased activity and employment in that sector. The trustees of pension schemes affected by the levy had the option of adjusting current or prospective scheme benefits to take account of the levies, which included the possibility of reducing future retirement benefits.

For the years 2011, 2012 and 2013, the rate was 0.60% of the pension scheme assets. For the year 2014, the rate was 0.75% of the assets and for the year 2015, the final year of the levy, the rate was 0.15%. Under the legislation, the payment of the levy was treated as a necessary expense of a pension scheme and the trustees or insurer, as appropriate, were entitled where needed to adjust current or prospective benefits payable under a scheme to take account of the

levy. It was up to the trustees or insurer to decide whether, when and how the levy should be passed on and to what extent, given the particular circumstances of the pension schemes for which they are responsible.

However, the legislation also included safeguards aimed at ensuring that, should the option of reducing scheme benefits be taken, it had to be applied in an equitable fashion across the different classes of scheme members that could include active, deferred and retired members. In no case could the reduction in an individual member's or class of member's benefits exceed the member's or class of member's share of the levy. Where pension scheme trustees or an insurer took the decision to treat the levy as an expense of the pension scheme, they would have adjusted current or prospective benefits payable to members under that scheme. The consequence of this treatment by the trustees or insurer could be a permanent reduction in members' benefits.

The value of the funds raised by way of the levies has been used to protect and create jobs and this helped to improve the financial and economic position of the State. Taxpayers to whom the impact of the levy may have been passed on by the chargeable persons responsible for the payment of the levy (the pension scheme trustees, etc.) will have since benefitted from tax reductions in the last number of Budgets.

Bank Guarantee Scheme

88. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to an article (details supplied) and a recent report by a company confirming that the former Anglo Irish Bank was insolvent in 2008; if his attention or that of his predecessors was further drawn to the fact that the company changed its position having reassured the ECB and the Government in 2008 that the bank was in fact solvent; his views on whether the repayment of ECB loans by the bank has now become a legal matter and that the legality of the repayment by Ireland of promissory notes associated with the losses of the bank is now in doubt; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6005/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Mr. David Tynan of PwC was appointed to the role of Assessor pursuant to the Anglo Irish Bank Corporation Act 2009 in November 2018.

The Assessor's report was published on the Department of Finance website on 12 May 2020 and the overall conclusion of this report is that the fair and reasonable aggregate value of the transferred shares and the extinguished rights in the bank as at 15 January 2009 for the purposes of payment of fair and reasonable compensation for the acquisition of those shares and the extinction of those rights was nil and therefore, that no compensation is payable to former shareholders of any class or to former rights holders.

The Assessor was appointed pursuant to the Anglo Irish Bank Corporation Act 2009 (the "Act"). Under the Act the Assessor is required to determine this value having regard to the following items:

- on the basis of the true financial state of Anglo Irish Bank on 15 January 2009, taking into account the underlying market values of Anglo Irish Bank's assets and the extent of its actual, contingent and prospective liabilities on that date;
- having regard to the rights attaching to each class of transferred shares; and
- assuming that no financial assistance, investment or guarantee (other than the guarantee already provided under the Credit Institutions (Financial Support) Act 2008) would in future be

provided to or made in Anglo Irish Bank, directly or indirectly, by the State.

The final report of the Anglo Irish Bank Assessor states that, in his opinion, absent the provision of recapitalisation funds from the Government that the former Anglo Irish Bank was unlikely to be able to continue to trade as it was “both cashflow and balance sheet insolvent”, as at 15 January 2009.

The Project Atlas October 2008 report, which PwC prepared, was based on Anglo’s IFRS balance sheet as at 30 September 2008 which was after the Government bank guarantee. The report stated that the balance sheet showed that the bank’s assets exceeded its liabilities.

I am aware of the recent media article but note that the work conducted by the Assessor cannot be compared to the reports undertaken by PwC under Project Atlas given the different dates involved and the fact the Assessor’s report was conducted on the assumption of no further future support being provided to the bank (in line with the requirements of the Act).

In relation to Promissory Note payments the Deputy will be aware that the Promissory Notes were cancelled consequent to the liquidation of IBRC in 2013 and that no payments have been made on those notes since that time.

Insurance Industry

89. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Finance if all insurers and reinsurers based or operating here have signalled to the Central Bank that they will not pay discretionary dividends or implement share buy back schemes for 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6042/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): In response to the Deputy’s question, my officials contacted the Central Bank for information on this matter. In their reply, the Central Bank indicated that as the information sought by the Deputy relates to their day-to-day supervisory work of (re) insurers, they are precluded from providing a response to your question. They also noted that they do not divulge firm specific information with respect to their supervisory activities.

The above said, I would note that on 2 April, EIOPA published a statement on dividend distribution and variable remuneration policies in the context of Covid-19. This statement sets out that (re) insurers should suspend all discretionary dividend distributions and share buy backs aimed at remunerating shareholders. In addition, any variable remuneration due to be paid by (re) insurers should also be considered for postponement at this time. The Central Bank, in its response to my officials, confirmed that it is fully aligned with this statement, which is designed to ensure that policyholders’ interests are protected. In addition, the Central Bank confirmed that it has communicated this to insurance firms bilaterally and through relevant industry bodies. I understand that a number of firms have already announced that they are deferring dividends in this context. I welcome this and believe others should also follow suit.

Finally, with regard to EU insurance firms that are not authorised by the Central Bank but that operate in the State, I am informed that the Central Bank’s expectation would be that EIOPA’s statement has been duly considered by the supervisory authority of the member State that they are supervised in.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

90. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Finance if an organisation (details supplied) has benefited from the wage subsidy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6116/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that, notwithstanding any obligations imposed on the Revenue Commissioners under section 851A of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 or any other enactment relating to the confidentiality of taxpayer information, section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 provides that the names and addresses of all employers to whom a temporary wage subsidy has been paid will be published by Revenue on its website.

Revenue further advise me that it will publish the details in question when the temporary wage subsidy scheme has ended. In the interest of fairness to all employers participating in the scheme, Revenue will not be commenting on whether any particular employer has availed of the scheme until the scheme has ended.

Banking Sector

91. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance if the report by a company (details supplied) into the activities of the SCBI will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6130/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): An External Review of the SBCI was completed by EY. This was published on the website of the SBCI on the 18th May 2020, along with the SBCI Strategic Plan 2020-2025.

Question No. 92 answered with Question No. 57.

VAT Rate Application

93. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the position relating to the VAT rate that applies to different types of activities in the commercial water sports sector including the provision of diving lessons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6166/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that the VAT rating of goods and services is subject to EU VAT law, with which Irish VAT law must comply. In general, the VAT Directive provides that all goods and services are liable to VAT at the standard rate unless they fall within categories of goods and services specified in the Directive in respect of which Member States may apply a lower rate or exempt from VAT.

In accordance with the Directive the provision of facilities for taking part in sporting activities, including commercial watersports activities, are taxable at the second reduced rate, 9% and the supply of sports lessons including diving are generally taxable at the standard rate, 23%.

However, a VAT exemption applies to the supply of training and development courses, subject to the training and retraining being of a vocational nature. The VAT exemption may apply to sports instruction, such as diving lessons that are provided in the manner of vocational training or retraining that may lead to a recognised qualification as a diving instructor. Further information is available in Revenue's guidance "VAT treatment of education and vocational training" found here:

www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/value-added-tax/part03-taxable-transactions-

Tax Collection

94. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Finance the amount collected in carbon tax in each of the years 2018 and 2019, respectively. [6161/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that the amount collected in Carbon Tax in each of the years 2018 and 2019 is €431.1 million and €430.4 million respectively.

Mortgage Interest Rates

95. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the progress he has made to date with banks here with regard to a significant reduction of interest rates on residential mortgages in view of the fact that they are some of the highest in the eurozone; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6181/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Decisions in relation to mortgage lending are a commercial matter for lenders and are based on a number of factors, including the cost of borrowing. While interest rates in Ireland remain higher than in many other European countries, there has been significant reduction in interest rates on new mortgage lending over the last 4-5 years. For example, the new business interest rate, excluding negotiations, on loans with fixations over one year, was 4.02% at Jan 2015 and is now 2.72%. These are significant reductions that benefit borrowers greatly over loan lifetimes.

A number of important factors determine the interest rates charged on mortgages. These include the fact that the pricing of loans needs to reflect credit risks and capital requirements (which in Ireland are elevated due to historical loss experience), operating costs, structural factors (for example the offering of cashback and other incentives in the Irish market) and weak competition in the domestic mortgage market. However, neither the Central Bank nor I have a statutory role to prescribe the lending, or indeed deposit, rates charged or paid by commercial banks or other commercial lenders.

Nevertheless, the Central Bank has put in place a range of measures in order to protect consumers who are taking out a mortgage. The consumer protection framework requires lenders to be 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; for example, through protections at the initial marketing/advertising stage, in assessing the affordability and suitability of the mortgage and at a time when borrowers may find themselves in financial difficulties.

In particular, the Central Bank introduced a number of increased protections for variable rate mortgage holders. The enhanced measures, which are provided for in an Addendum to the Consumer Protection Code 2012, and became effective in February 2017, require lenders to explain to borrowers how their variable interest rates have been set, including in the event of an increase. The measures also improve the level of information required to be provided to borrowers on variable rates about other mortgage products their lender provides which could provide savings for the borrower and signpost the borrower to the CCPC's mortgage switching tool.

Furthermore, the Central Bank also introduced additional changes to the Consumer Protec-

tion Code to help consumers make savings on their mortgage repayments, provide additional protections to consumers who are eligible to switch, and facilitate mortgage switching through enhancing the transparency of the mortgage framework. The new and enhanced requirements took effect from January 2019.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

96. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied) regarding the temporary wage subsidy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6191/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is an emergency measure to deal with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy. It builds on data returned to Revenue through the PAYE system and as such is a fully automated solution. The automated solution, which was developed in a very short timeframe in response to the pandemic, is designed around the dates specified in the legislation and cannot function where those timelines are not strictly adhered to. The timelines require that employees were on the payroll at 29 February 2020 and that employers had fulfilled their PAYE reporting obligations for February 2020 before 15 March 2020.

The 15 March 2020 deadline in respect of the February payroll submission was recently extended to ‘before’ 1 April 2020 by Revenue under its care and management provisions. However, this concession can only apply where all previous payroll submissions were received by 15 March 2020. The concession, which was implemented on 24 April 2020, is also only applicable on a prospective basis and cannot be applied to previous pay periods.

I am advised by Revenue that the business in question filed its February 2020 payroll submission on 20 March 2020 and as such was outside of the 15 March deadline as specified in the legislation. However, the business does qualify under the revised concessionary arrangements and has been receiving TWSS payments in respect of payrolls made on or after 24 April 2020.

The business also received TWSS payments in error in respect of pay periods prior to 24 April to which it was not entitled. The error occurred due a combination of duplicate payroll submissions (by the business) and a technical issue with Revenue’s IT system at that time. Revenue engaged directly with the business on the issue on 8 May 2020 and confirmed that the earlier payments were made in error and should be refunded.

Revenue has assured me that it will work with the business to agree a repayment arrangement that takes account of its current financial circumstances.

Question No. 97 answered with Question No. 45.

Tax Data

98. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated amount that would be generated by imposing a €500 per year tax on all second homes, a €850 per year tax on all third homes and a €1,300 per year tax on all fourth and subsequent homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6247/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am informed by Revenue that the Exchequer yield from the introduction of the additional taxes suggested by the Deputy is estimated to be in the region of €290 million in a full year. This yield assumes that that tax would

be imposed on all non-principal private residences, excluding residential properties in the ownership of local authorities and approved housing bodies.

Tax Data

99. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated revenue which could be achieved by increasing the number of audit staff employed by the Revenue Commissioners by an extra 180 persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6248/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Revenue has advised me that investment in the training and development of a Revenue auditor or investigator can take up to three years, depending on previous relevant experience. Therefore, it is not possible to accurately estimate the additional yield that would immediately arise from the recruitment of 180 audit staff.

Revenue has also advised me that it undertakes a range of risk management interventions to target and confront different types of non-compliance in addition to tax evasion, for example, shadow economy and smuggling detection activity. The range of interventions used by Revenue has expanded in recent years to cover such diverse risks and includes, assurance checks, aspect queries, profile interviews, enforcement, investigations and prosecutions in addition to tax audits.

The intervention deployed by Revenue in a case depends on the level of risk involved, and the average rate of return varies, depending on the scale of non-compliance. Also, in some types of interventions, for example enforcement, the focus is on the detection of drugs and fiscal smuggling where the direct exchequer yield is not the immediate objective.

As Minister for Finance, I have always responded positively to any requests from Revenue for additional resources needed to tackle identified areas of tax or duty risk. For example, in each Budget since Budget 2016 I have introduced a series of ‘compliance measures’ changes, which were aimed at raising tax revenue through enhanced taxpayer compliance and on each occasion, I have provided the necessary additional resources required by Revenue to ensure successful delivery. The analysis of the results of these compliance measures is available on the Revenue website at: www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/research/reviews/index.aspx, which may be of interest to the Deputy.

Tax Data

100. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Finance the number of companies without an EORI number; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6275/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that there are currently 65,946 businesses registered for a Customs EORI number. The Revenue Commissioners noted that 92.7% of the value of imports from the UK in 2019 and 95.8% of the value of exports to the UK in 2019 was carried out by businesses who now have an EORI number.

In relation to businesses who trade with the UK, the Revenue Commissioners have analysed the VAT Information Exchange System (VIES) returns and identified some 96,000 businesses that traded with the UK in 2019. Of these 96,000 businesses, approx. 57,000 do not currently have an EORI number. Of the larger businesses with annual UK import or export trade in excess of €50,000, and therefore with a potential significant supply chain exposure to trade with the

UK, the number without an EORI number is approximately 3,000.

The Revenue Commissioners have engaged closely with businesses during 2019 and this has continued in 2020. This engagement has contributed to the positive picture portrayed by this data. However, I am aware that many businesses have been and continue to be adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and that social distancing requirements, while essential to prevent the spread of the virus, are unfortunately significantly impeding their ability to carry out many operational tasks.

Nonetheless and with this in mind, there are a range of actions that the Revenue Commissioners have encouraged and continue to encourage relevant businesses to consider, to ensure that businesses can trade with the UK after the transition period. This includes:

- Undertake supply chain and cash flow assessments so as to fully understand and identify the impact of Brexit,
- Register for customs by getting an EORI number, if not already registered,
- Ensure they have the capability to lodge customs declarations, by either getting customs software or engaging a customs agent,
- Understand the impact of and make arrangements for paying import duties,
- Know the origin and commodity code(s) of the goods traded,
- Ensure compliance with product certification requirements,
- Understand the obligations involved if trading in animal or plant products, and
- Consider what customs related simplifications or authorisations might be relevant and that would further ease the smooth and efficient flow of trade and goods at import or export.

I very much support this engagement by the Revenue Commissioners and I urge all businesses to take the necessary steps to ensure they can trade with the UK post the transition period.

Brexit Issues

101. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Finance if the impact of a hard or no-deal Brexit on the economy here has been revised and updated by his Department taking into account the impact the Covid-19 pandemic has already had on the economy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6276/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Stability Programme Update sets out the latest macroeconomic and fiscal outlook, taking into account the impact of COVID-19. The Irish economy is expected to contract by 10.5 per cent this year.

Economic activity will gradually recover in the second half of the year, picking up momentum with growth of 6 per cent next year. In relation to Brexit, this is based on the assumption of a free-trade agreement being concluded between the EU and the UK at the end of the transition period in December this year.

I am satisfied that the existing analysis in the joint research by the Department and the ESRI, published in March last year, broadly captures the range of possible future relationships between the EU and the UK.

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.

Under these scenarios, over the medium-term 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. However, the impacts would be expected to be front-loaded.

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 future relationship, and will update the macroeconomic and fiscal projections to take account of any developments alongside Budget 2021.

Bank Charges

102. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Finance if he has engaged with the banking sector to temporarily remove the current fees charged to businesses for the use of contactless payment (details supplied). [6311/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Deputy will be aware that card payments, and in particular contactless payments, are being promoted in order to support public health policy at this time.

Fees for the acceptance of card transactions are charged to retailers by their acquirer, who manages the account and relationship between a retailer and the various card schemes. All acquirers in Ireland are independent commercial entities and I have no statutory role in relation to the charges applied by acquirers.

Acquiring is a competitive market and retailers could stand to benefit from shopping around for lower rates from acquirers for accepting card payments.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

103. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Finance if residents of direct provision centres that were in taxable employment prior to the Covid-19 restrictions being put in place are eligible to participate in the wage subsidy scheme; and if not, the reason therefor. [6314/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) makes no distinction between employees by reference to their place of residence. All eligible employees of qualifying employers are entitled to the wage subsidy.

The TWSS is provided for in section 28 of the recently enacted Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 (The Act). Of necessity, the underlying legislation and the scheme itself have been developed very quickly, having regard to the objective of getting much needed assistance to employers and employees, where businesses have been seriously affected by the pandemic and the necessary restrictions introduced to fight the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

The TWSS builds on data returned to Revenue through its real-time PAYE system. It must

be accepted that the underlying legislation and the scheme itself cannot be tailored to meet every individual unique set of circumstances for either employers or employees. The core principles of the scheme are that

- the business is suffering significant negative economic impact due to the pandemic,
- the employees were on the payroll at 29 February 2020, and
- the employer had fulfilled its PAYE reporting obligations for February 2020, by 15 March 2020 (which date was recently extended to 31 March 2020 by Revenue concession and subject to conditions).

The TWSS is predicated on the employer wanting to keep the employees on the payroll and to retain them until business picks up. The amount of the subsidy for each employee is calculated based on the average net weekly pay reported for January and February 2020.

There is no distinction made with regard to the subsidy amount, on the basis of whether the business has closed due to the restrictions brought in by the Government, or whether the business has continued to trade with employees continuing to work part-time or full time with similar hours as before the Covid-19 pandemic.

VAT Rate Application

104. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if the Revenue Commissioners has scope under the EU Commission Decision C (2020) 2146 of 3 April 2020 to extend the zero rate of VAT on medical supplies to an organisation such as dentists and shop owners on condition that the supplies are distributed free of charge by the organisation to persons affected by or at risk from Covid-19 or involved in combating the Covid-19 outbreak; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6388/20]

105. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if he will publish the request he made to the Revenue Commissioners to apply a zero rate of VAT on medical supplies under EU Commission Decision C (2020) 2146 of 3 April 2020; the scope of the request; if it included organisations such as shops and dentists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6383/20]

112. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider introducing the appropriate changes to rules and regulations in relation to the VAT at 23% and the import duty at 6.3% which applies to the import of face masks (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6558/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 104, 105 and 112 together.

The European Commission Decision C(2020)2146, adopted on 3 April 2020, provides for the importation of goods to fight the effects of COVID -19 from outside the European Union without the payment of VAT or Customs Duty from January 2020. Such relief is permitted where the goods are imported by or on behalf of State bodies, public bodies and other bodies governed by public law, disaster relief agencies and organisations approved by Revenue including organisations regulated by the State and involved in the care, support and treatment of people at risk of COVID-19 and there is no scope to extend this to other sectors. The goods must be distributed or made available free of charge to the persons affected by or at risk from or involved in combating the COVID-19 outbreak by the bodies and organisations referred to

above. The relief is scheduled to end on 31 July 2020 but there is provision for an extension if this is required following a review and consultation with Member States.

Following a request from my Department, Revenue has also implemented, on an administrative basis, the application of the zero rate of VAT to the domestic supply of personal protection equipment including facemasks, ventilators, thermometers, hand sanitisers and oxygen as necessary to combat COVID-19 when supplied to hospitals, nursing homes, GP practices and the like, for use in the delivery of COVID-19 related health care services to their patients. This concessionary treatment will apply until 31 July, subject to review. The scope of the relief corresponds with the relief on the importation of these goods by the bodies specified in the Commission Decision.

The extension of zero rating to supplies of those specified medical supplies to dentists and shop owners and indeed other sectors and businesses would require a change in legislation to define the scope of, and provide a legal basis for, the desired zero rating. In addition it is important to stress that a business, such as a shop, which is registered for Irish VAT and incurs VAT in relation to goods which will be used for the purposes of a taxable business is entitled to reclaim the VAT incurred through their VAT return.

Tax Reliefs Availability

106. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Finance if there is tax relief or grants or supports available to businesses that will need to incur costs to implement social distancing measures in the interest of public health to reopen their doors due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6415/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): When computing the amount of profits or gains to be charged to corporation tax, a company is, in general, entitled to deductions in respect of revenue expenditure wholly and exclusively incurred for the purposes of its trade as provided for in section 81 of the Taxes Consolidation Act, 1997.

I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that where a business incurs costs to implement social distancing measures for the purposes of the trade or profession concerned, those costs will be tax-deductible under the general income tax and corporation tax rules.

Capital expenditures are not immediately tax-deductible for the year of such expenditure. However, if a business were to incur capital expenditure on plant and machinery to implement social distancing measures capital allowances could be claimed on that expenditure. These capital allowances would provide an annual deduction from income, of 12.5% of the expenditure, for 8 years.

The Government has announced a range of measures designed to support businesses during the COVID-19 crisis. Details of which are available at: www.gov.ie/en/publication/fe8f00-government-outlines-further-measures-to-support-businesses-impacted/.

The Government is fully aware of the unprecedented impact that the Covid-19 corona virus is having on business and people's livelihoods. In addition to support measures currently in place, my officials are continually examining a range of possible measures to ensure that the economy is in a position to recover while maintaining a stable tax base.

Exchequer Deficit

107. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated deficit the State will have accrued in public finances as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic; his views on whether Ireland will be necessitated to access funds through the European Stability Mechanism to meet such a deficit; his further views on whether the flexibility of the European Central Bank to deviate from capital key purchase targets and acquire specific quantities of Eurozone countries' bonds should be exploited in the coming months to fund an economic recovery and ensure the State returns to growth in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6424/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Government published its Draft Stability Programme Update on 21 April. This set out an updated economic and fiscal scenario, for this year and next, incorporating the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The necessary fiscal cost of providing short-term support to the private sector will be significant. A general government deficit of €23 billion was projected for this year.

The cost of these measures was estimated at €6.8 billion, with the most important being the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme. These are in place to support those who have lost their employment due to the restrictions and to help maintain the worker-employer relationship.

Following the introduction of further measures aimed at supporting enterprises my Department published a document in order to update the suite of measures detailed in the SPU. This document is available here: www.gov.ie/en/publication/4d2b1f-covid-19-policy-response-overview-of-economic-support-measures/.

The Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund, within the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF), will utilise up to €2 billion of ISIF's readily available capital to invest in medium and large enterprises. This will not give rise to any additional Exchequer costs nor require any further borrowings to finance it.

The starting position is favourable: a general government surplus was delivered last year; the Rainy Day Fund (RDF) was established; at end-April the NTMA had c.€20 billion of cash - pre-funding this year's redemptions; and there are no bonds maturing next year.

In light of the updated fiscal position, including the Exchequer Borrowing Requirement of €15.6 billion, the National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA) has announced a revised bond funding range of €20 billion to €24 billion for the year.

The NTMA has issued €12.5 billion in bonds so far this year. This includes two new bonds maturing in 2027 and 2035. There are further bond auctions scheduled this quarter. The NTMA also plans to increase Treasury Bill and Commercial Paper Issuance. Overall short term issuance is expected to increase by a further €5 billion by year end.

The first instalment of the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) surplus of €2 billion was due to be made this year and had already been accounted for in the Budget 2020 fiscal projections.

Given the scale of the impact on the economy of Covid-19 it is envisaged that the RDF drawdown, when it happens, will be for the current value of the Fund i.e. €1.5 billion less expenses incurred by the NTMA in managing the Fund. Drawdown of the RDF means that the Exchequer Borrowing Requirement for 2020 is c. €1.5 billion less than would otherwise be the case. The rationale for having such a Fund – for use in exceptional circumstances such as these – has been strengthened by this crisis.

Due to recent successful debt issuances by the NTMA, there is no immediate need for drawdown and no specific date as to when drawdown will happen. Last month the NTMA success-

fully borrowed €6 billion in the bond market for 7 years at less than ¼ of 1 percent.

The interest rate environment remains accommodative owing to European Central Bank policy action and the introduction of its €750 billion Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme (PEPP).

In relation to the Deputy's question on the actions of the European Central Bank (ECB), I have previously welcomed its monetary policy response to the pandemic, and particularly the PEPP and greater flexibility in its refinancing operations. I expect banks to use the positive effects of these measures to support the economy and I know that the Central Bank of Ireland shares this view. In terms of changes to ECB operations, I should point out that Article 130 of the Treaty for the European Union sets out that Government must respect the independence of the European Central Bank and not seek to influence its decisions.

Finally, I agreed with my fellow Euro-area finance Ministers the features and standardised terms of the European Stability mechanism (ESM) Pandemic Crisis Support instrument. This ESM instrument has been tailored to meet the challenges of this crisis and will provide a safety net of c.€240 billion for Euro-area Member States.

I consider this instrument to be an important and credible safety net for the euro area, both in terms of its magnitude and availability to all euro area Member States, however, I do not envisage that Ireland will avail of this instrument for the reasons I have already set out.

Question No. 108 answered with Question No. 61.

Tax Credits

109. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Finance if the tax credit given to the carers of incapacitated persons will be increased in view of the fact that carers are providing full-time care and attention and will have no entitlement to a contributory State pension in due course; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6434/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): There are a number of tax credits and reliefs available to individuals who are carers of incapacitated persons.

The Incapacitated Child Tax Credit is a tax credit of €3,300, which can be claimed by a person in respect of a child who is permanently incapacitated either physically or mentally from maintaining himself or herself and had become so before reaching 21 years of age or finishing full-time education. More information is available on Revenue's website: www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-05.pdf.

The Home Carer Tax Credit is available to married couples or civil partners that are jointly assessed, where one spouse or civil partner stays at home to take care of a dependent person. Its current value is €1,600. The carer spouse or civil partner may earn up to €7,200 per year without affecting the amount of the credit awarded. Where this income exceeds €7,200, the amount of credit available is reduced by one half of the excess over €7,200, subject to a maximum income limit in 2020 of €10,400. The Home Carer Tax Credit has been increased in each of the last five Budgets. More information is available on Revenue's website: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-29.pdf>.

The Dependent Relative Tax Credit is a tax credit of €70, which can be claimed by an individual who maintains, at his or her own expense, a relative, or a child, who is unable to maintain himself or herself. This credit cannot be claimed in conjunction with the Incapacitated Child

Tax Credit and is subject to a cap on the income of the dependent relative. Further information on this credit can be found at the link: www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-27.pdf.

The Single Person Child Carer Tax Credit is a tax credit of €1,650, which is available to a single parent (whether widowed, separated, deserted or a single parent) with a dependent child who is under 18 or, if over 18, is an incapacitated child who satisfies the Incapacitated Child Tax Credit criteria. Detailed guidance on this credit is available at the link: www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-41.pdf.

In addition, income tax relief is available for certain health expenses, including visits to the doctor, medicines, nursing care in the patient's home (in certain circumstances), nursing home fees, expenditure in respect of children with life threatening illnesses, kidney patients' expenses, mileage for individuals who need to travel for treatment and certain medical appliances. More information on tax relief for health expenses is available at the link: www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-12.pdf.

I have no plans to make any changes to the abovementioned tax credits at this time.

The question of entitlement to the State Contributory Pension is a matter for the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

Tax Data

110. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated amount of revenue that would be generated if the betting intermediary duty rate increased from 25% to 30%; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6515/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that the additional amount of revenue that could be generated if the betting intermediary duty rate increased from 25% to 30% is estimated at €0.55m in a full year, potentially bringing the total amount for this duty to €3.3 million in a full year.

Departmental Data

111. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Finance the dividend paid to the Exchequer by each commercial State company in 2018 and 2019, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6516/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Details of the dividends paid to the Exchequer in 2018 and 2019 by each commercial State body are provided in the table below.

Information on such dividends and receipts paid to the Exchequer are published on a monthly basis by my Department in the Fiscal Monitor which is available at www.gov.ie/en/collection/bf14dc-fiscal-monitors/.

Company	2018€	2019€
Coillte Teoranta	15,000,000	13,000,000
Dublin Airport Authority	37,400,000	40,000,000
Dublin Port Company	12,173,000	4,100,000
Eirgrid	4,000,000	4,000,000

Company	2018€	2019€
Electricity Supply Board	33,056,621	41,199,071
Ervia	139,089,000	139,404,000
Irish Aviation Authority	19,458,000	19,524,000
Port Of Cork Company	714,000	250,000
Port of Waterford	0	330,897
Shannon Foynes Port	300,000	350,000
Vodafone Group	0	1
Total	261,190,621	262,157,969

Question No. 112 answered with Question No. 104.

Tax Collection

113. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Finance if recipients of the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment will be subjected to tax on the payments at a later date; if no decision has been made, when a decision will be made; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6566/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Payments made under the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) Scheme are an income support and share the characteristics of income. Other income earners in receipt of comparable “normal wages” are taxable on those wages. In the interest of equity, therefore, payments made under the PUP scheme are subject to income tax. However, tax will not be collected in real-time while the scheme is in operation. In the case of the PUP, the taxation position will follow the general taxation rule for social welfare payments and, thus, while liable to income tax, the payments will be exempt from PRSI and the Universal Social Charge. This will be the case whether the recipient of the PUP is either a former PAYE worker or a person who was previously self-employed.

While not liable to tax in real time under the PAYE system, the liability to tax on payments under the PUP scheme will instead normally be determined by way of review at the end of the tax year. I am advised by Revenue that when an end of the year review takes place, it may be the case that an employee’s unused tax credits will cover any further liability that may arise as a result of taxation of PUP payments. Where this is not the case and should a tax liability arise, it is normal Revenue practice to collect any tax owing in manageable amounts by reducing an individual’s tax credits for a future year or future years in order to minimise any hardship. Additionally, if an individual has any additional tax credits to claim, for example, health expenses, this will also reduce any tax that may be owing. I have been assured by Revenue that they will be adopting a fair and flexible approach to collecting income tax due on payments made under the PUP scheme.

Question No. 114 answered with Question No. 71.

Insurance Costs

115. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that certain insurers are increasing the insurance premium of persons whose NCT certificate is out of date as a result of the NCT test centres being closed due to Covid-19;

if the matter will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6613/20]

116. Deputy Michael McGrath asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that certain insurers are using claims history information on a more granular geographic basis than before as a reason for increasing premiums; if the matter will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6614/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 115 and 116 together.

At the outset you should note that neither I, as Minister for Finance, nor the Central Bank of Ireland can interfere in the provision or pricing of insurance products or have the power to direct insurance companies to provide cover to specific individuals or businesses. This position is reinforced by the EU framework for insurance (the Solvency II Directive) which expressly prohibits Member States from doing so. Consequently, I am not in a position to direct insurance companies as to how they price their policies including whether they should use the two practices mentioned in the Deputies' questions.

On a general level, my understanding is that insurers will use a combination of rating factors in making their individual decisions on whether to offer cover and what terms to apply. For example, in relation to motor insurance, factors may include those such as the age of the driver and the relevant driving experience, as well as the age and type of vehicle, how the vehicle is used, the claims record, and the number of drivers. Insurers also price in accordance with their own past claims experience, and do not all use the same combination of rating factors, so as a result prices vary across the market. In addition to the above, it is important for the Deputies to appreciate that I am not in a position to compel insurers to disclose information such as actuarial data covering the geographic basis of claims history and how it affects the pricing of premiums.

The above said, in relation to the issue raised about increased premiums where NCT certificates are out of date due to the COVID 19 related closure of the NCT test centres, I would note that Insurance Ireland has previously indicated that most of its members have accepted the four-month extension period for NCT certificates. As such I expect that this commitment will be honoured by the sector and if it is not then I believe that would be contrary to the spirit of the earlier Insurance Ireland announcement. As I have said many times previously, the sector must treat their customers fairly.

Finally, my view is that it is now more important than ever for consumers to shop around on their insurance policies. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC), on its website, recommends that consumers get quotes from a number of insurance companies, including their current one. Their website also includes a car insurance shopping around checklist and other tips on cutting car insurance costs which may prove useful to consumers.

Tax Collection

117. Deputy Ged Nash asked the Minister for Finance if employees enrolled in the TWSS will have non-statutory deductions automatically reapplied after exiting the scheme while remaining in employment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6619/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is provided for in section 28 of the recently enacted Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020). Of necessity, the underlying legislation and the scheme itself have been developed very quickly, having regard to the overarching, urgent Government ob-

jective of getting much needed assistance to employers and employees, where businesses have been seriously affected by the pandemic and the necessary restrictions introduced to fight the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

The intention of the TWSS is to maintain employees' net income as close as possible to normal net income and to ensure that the employees receive the full subsidy payment value. Non-statutory payroll deductions, for example, credit union deductions, union fees, etc., are normally deducted from net pay after tax. Revenue guidance provides that employers should not apply the non-statutory payroll deductions from net pay, unless the value of the additional gross pay (employer top-up) exceeds the value of the deductions, or that the employer is doing so with the agreement of the employee.

I have been advised by Revenue that non-statutory deductions from pay are matters that are agreed between the employee and employer concerned and do not form part of the payroll submission reported by employers to Revenue. Therefore, it will be a matter for the employer and the employee concerned to agree to have non-statutory deductions reapplied to the employee payroll after exiting the TWSS.

Insurance Coverage

118. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Finance if an issue (details supplied) regarding wedding insurance policies will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6636/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): At the outset, I would like to express my sympathy for those whose wedding plans have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the Deputy should note that neither I, nor the Central Bank of Ireland, can interfere in the provision or pricing of insurance products, or their contractual terms, 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. 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 contractual terms and conditions of insurance products.

Whether an individual can make a claim in relation to the cancellation of their wedding due to COVID-19 will depend on the specifics of the individual policy. Whilst I strongly believe that insurers should treat their customers honestly, fairly and professionally and honour those elements of the policies covered, including wedding insurance claims, in line with the Central Bank's Consumer Protection Code, it is important to note that neither the Government nor the Central Bank have any role in adjudicating on such matters.

Where a dispute occurs in relation to the interpretation of an insurance policy and the policyholder is dissatisfied with the service received by their insurer, including in relation to the situation mentioned in this question, then the appropriate channels for resolving the dispute must continue to be followed i.e. use of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO). The Deputy will be aware that the FSPO is a statutory official who acts as an independent arbiter of disputes which consumers may have with their insurance company or other financial service provider. The FSPO can be contacted either by email at info@fspo.ie or by telephone at 01-567-7000. I note that, in this instance, the individual referred to in the Deputy's question intends to lodge a complaint with the FSPO and I believe this is the best way of resolving this matter.

Mortgage Lending

119. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if all mortgage holders and business customers of the banks availing of a payment break as a result of Covid-19 will have the option of having the term of their loan extended in order that they do not face a rise in monthly repayments when they resume paying in view of the announcement of 11 May 2020 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6664/20]

126. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if the banks have now agreed that anyone availing of the Covid-19 break in loan or mortgage payments can now extend the loan term in order that their repayments are no higher; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6817/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 119 and 126 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar and I, along with the Minister for Business, Enterprise & Innovation, met with the Chief Executives of the five Irish major retail banks last week.

The Taoiseach emphasised the important role of the banking sector in supporting the gradual re-opening of the Irish economy by ensuring a flow of credit to businesses as they begin to trade again, in line with the government's Roadmap for Re-opening Society and Business.

We welcomed the ongoing work of the banks in helping business customers and mortgage customers impacted by COVID-19 which included the initial three month payment-breaks that allowed households and businesses to defer some of their most significant outgoings. On 30 April, the members of the Banking and Payments Federation Ireland (BPMFI) announced their intention to extend these payment breaks to six months for households and businesses which require it.

Business and mortgage customers will have the option of having the term of their loan extended so they do not face a rise in monthly repayments when they resume paying. Importantly, it will not affect customers' credit rating, nor increase the burden on non-performing loans on the banks.

The Central Bank is focused on ensuring that extensions to COVID-19 related payment breaks operate in borrowers' best interests and it has communicated its expectations to the BPMFI that at the end of the agreed payment break, borrowers should be given the option to either:

- i. repay the loan within the remaining term or
- ii. extend the term of the loan.

This choice should apply for all loans and the impact of both options on the overall cost of credit and monthly repayments should be fully explained to the customer, noting that borrower circumstances and the appropriateness of each option will differ.

As part of their supervisory work, the Central Bank will monitor compliance with this expectation and take action, where their expectations are not met.

Question No. 120 answered with Question No. 45.

121. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the companies that qualify for the proposed tax warehousing scheme; if it is restricted to businesses unable to trade due to the Covid-19 related restrictions; if not, if it is for businesses which have experienced significant falls in turnover; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6677/20]

122. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if the tax warehousing scheme that is currently operational on an administrative basis will be exactly the same as the scheme that will be run under legislation; if there are restrictions or limitations in place that would prevent the Revenue Commissioners from implementing the scheme without primary legislation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6682/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 121 and 122 together.

In March this year, Revenue announced that it was suspending debt collection and the charging of interest on late payment for the January/February and March/April 2020 VAT periods and the February, March and April 2020 PAYE (Employer) periods. On 7 May 2020, Revenue announced the extension of these arrangements to include the May/June 2020 VAT period and May and June 2020 PAYE (Employer) liabilities. These measures are available not only to businesses unable to trade due to Covid-19 related restrictions, but also to assist any businesses who are experiencing tax payment difficulties as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is intended that, when enacted, the legislation to provide statutory backing for these debt warehousing arrangements will similarly provide for availability of the scheme on this basis.

The tax debt warehousing scheme is currently being operated under Revenue's "care and management" powers but will be put on a statutory footing. Primary legislation is necessary to underpin the reduced rate of interest that is to apply to the deferred liabilities. Currently, statutory interest applies a rate of approximately 10% per annum on late payments of the taxes covered by the scheme - PAYE (Employer) and VAT liabilities - but the planned legislation will provide for the reduced interest rates for the scheme announced earlier this month for the Covid-19 related VAT and PAYE (Employer) tax debts. Interest under the scheme will apply as follows:

- 0% for the "Covid-19 restricted trading phase", the period when the business is unable to trade, or has experienced tax payment difficulties, due to the Covid-19 related restrictions, and including the first two months after the business resumes "normal" trading;
- 0% for the "zero interest" phase, which will last for 12 months after the end of the first phase; and
- c. 3% per annum for the "reduced interest phase", which will begin after the end of the second phase.

The enactment of the required primary legislation will supplement the current administrative arrangements and ensure certainty regarding the conditions of the scheme. The necessary amendments to the relevant provisions of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 and the Value Added Tax Consolidation Act 2010 will be brought forward in due course.

Further information on tax debts warehousing is available on the Revenue website here.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

123. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Finance if a company which had some

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staff on the wage subsidy scheme who will be re-employed after 1 May 2020 will have their wage subsidy refunded; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6708/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is an emergency measure to deal with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy. The underlying legislation and the scheme itself were developed within a very short timeframe to support the urgent Government objective of getting much needed assistance to employers and employees, where businesses have been seriously affected by the necessary restrictions introduced to fight the pandemic. The purpose of the scheme is to ensure the relationship between employers and employees is maintained to the greatest extent possible so that businesses can restart operations quickly once that is possible.

While the TWSS is payable to eligible staff that were rehired after 1 May 2020, I have been advised by Revenue that further IT development work is required to facilitate the processing of such cases. Revenue is actively working on this system development and is confident that the required technology will be in place later this week.

Revenue has confirmed that in excess of 22,000 employees have started or restarted employments since 1 May, of which approximately 5,000 are 'rehired' staff that are eligible for the TWSS. Employers who submitted payroll after 1 May for those 'rehired' staff will be processed for refund this week.

Brexit Issues

124. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance the projected cost to the Exchequer in the event of a failure to agree a trade agreement between the European Union and the UK; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6723/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy may recall, Budget 2020 was framed on the assumption of a disorderly Brexit. While the fiscal and economic circumstances have changed dramatically, the magnitude of the projected 'fiscal swing' forecast under such a scenario may be indicative of the potential impact of the transition period ending without a trade arrangement.

In nominal terms, the Budget 2020 forecast for 2020 projected a general government deficit of some €2.0 billion, compared to the SPU forecast (previous April) of a general government surplus of €1.2 billion. At the time, this negative 'swing' was broadly indicative of the fiscal cost of a disorderly Brexit.

These projections were point in time forecasts published in October of last year. Since then, the fiscal and economic situation has evolved significantly, including, but not limited to, the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic.

At best, October's forecast can be seen as an indication of the scale of the economic and fiscal impact of the transition period ending without a trade deal. An updated estimate - taking into account the present circumstances - may differ significantly from these historic figures.

As set out in the recently published Stability Programme Update, the combined effect of the Covid shock with a disorderly UK exit would have severe implications for the economy and, accordingly, for the public finances.

Trade negotiations between the EU and UK are ongoing and the outcome is highly uncertain. The full set of economic and fiscal forecasts will be updated by my Department as part of

the Budget 2021 process.

Universal Social Charge Application

125. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Finance the way in which USC charges are applied to apprentices; if he has considered waiving this charge for apprentices; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6768/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Under Section 985 Taxes Consolidation Act 1997, the Education Training Boards (ETB) are required to deduct tax under the Income Tax PAYE system on the making of payments to craft apprentices. The Income Tax PAYE system places an obligation on employers to make deductions at source of Income Tax, USC and PRSI from payments made to employees and an obligation to remit such deductions to the Revenue Commissioners

The ETB's requirements in relation to the deduction and paying over of USC from such emoluments are set out in the Universal Social Charge Regulations 2018 (S.I. No. 510 of 2018).

The USC was introduced in Budget 2011 to replace the Income Levy and Health Levy. It was a necessary measure to widen the tax base, remove poverty traps and raise revenue to reduce the budget deficit. It is a more sustainable charge than those it replaced and it is applied at a low rate on a wide base. Taxation revenue from all taxes, including the Universal Social Charge, goes towards funding essential public services and the provision of these services would be negatively impacted if there was a fall in the income received from such taxation.

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%, with fewer people on incomes around the national average having any income subject to the 40% rate of income tax.

It is not my intention to exempt this charge for apprentices. It is a general principle of taxation that, as far as possible, income from all sources should be subject to taxation. Ireland has one of the most progressive personal income tax systems in the EU and OECD. This means that Ireland's tax system is designed to ensure that those on lower incomes pay less tax than those who earn more.

Question No. 126 answered with Question No. 119.

Banking Sector

127. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether banks should extend the approval in principle periods for those on the temporary wage subsidy scheme and other such Covid-19 measures; if he has consulted with the banks on the issue; his views on whether such a move would not represent an issue for the banks as they will continue to have the right to withdraw approval when the loan advances to the loan offer stage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6818/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The European Union (Consumer Mortgage Credit Agreements) Regulations 2016 (CMCAR) provide that, before concluding a mortgage credit agreement, a lender must make a thorough assessment of the consumer's credit-

worthiness. The assessment must take appropriate account of factors relevant to verifying the prospect of the consumer being able to meet his or her obligations under the credit agreement. The CMCAR further provides that a lender should only make credit available to a consumer where the result of the creditworthiness assessment indicates that the consumer's obligations resulting from the credit agreement are likely to be met in the manner required under that agreement. The assessment of creditworthiness must be carried out on the basis of information on the consumer's income and expenses and other financial and economic circumstances which is necessary, sufficient and proportionate. In addition, the Central Bank's Consumer Protection Code 2012 imposes 'Knowing the Consumer and Suitability' requirements on lenders. Under these requirements, lenders are required to assess affordability of credit and the suitability of a product or service based on the individual circumstances of each borrower.

Within the parameters of the regulatory framework, it is a matter for regulated entities to manage their own processes for the various mortgage application, consideration, approval and granting stages, including in respect of validity periods for mortgage "Approval in Principle".

Lenders continue to process mortgage applications and have supports in place to assist customers impacted by COVID-19. Banking & Payments Federation Ireland (BPF) has published a Covid-19 Support FAQ which customers can consult, or customers can contact their lender directly, if they have any queries or concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on their mortgage application. The BPF's FAQ advises that lenders may extend the period of a mortgage "Approval in Principle" where an individual's circumstances have not materially changed as a result of COVID-19. This will likely be for 3-6 months, but it may vary depending on the lender's assessment of an individual's circumstances. However, if their circumstances have materially changed as a result of Covid-19, lenders may keep the application open on its system for a period of time; but this again may vary depending on the lender's assessment of an individual's circumstances. After this period of time, the lender will undertake a review of the application which will likely include a request for the individual to provide an update on their employment and income situation.

It should also be noted that the Central Bank has indicated that it expects all regulated firms to take a consumer-focused approach and to act in their customers' best interests at all times, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

128. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Finance if the procedures of the wage subsidy scheme will be investigated (details supplied). [6822/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 is the legislation underpinning the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS). The Government's priority in so far as the TWSS is concerned was, and is, to ensure that all employers experiencing significant negative economic disruption from COVID-19 can register for, and start to receive, payment quickly. The purpose of the scheme is to ensure that the relationship between employers and employees is maintained to the greatest extent possible so that businesses can restart operations quickly once that is possible. Eligibility for the scheme can be satisfied by an employer once they meet the relevant criteria.

The TWSS scheme is available to eligible employers across all sectors, excluding the Public Service and Non-Commercial Semi-State Sector. This includes businesses that have closed due to the Covid-19 restrictions and those that continue to operate and employ their workforce. The amount of the subsidy for each employee is calculated based on the average net weekly

pay reported for January and February 2020. There is no distinction made regarding the subsidy amount based on whether the business has closed for any defined period due to the restrictions brought in by the Government or has continued to trade with employees continuing to work full time or part time, with similar hours as before the Covid-19 pandemic.

The employer is expected to make best efforts to maintain the employee's net income, reflected in the average net weekly payment for January and February 2020, for the duration of the TWSS. There is, however, no minimum amount that the employer must pay as an additional payment in order to be eligible for the scheme, but, for Revenue operational systems reasons, the employer will need to enter at least €0.01 in Gross Pay when running its payroll. If the employer makes an additional payment greater than the difference allowed by the scheme, then the subsidy value refundable to the employer will be reduced by this excess amount when the refund reconciliation is performed by Revenue in due course.

Revenue published detailed guidance on employer eligibility and supporting proofs for the TWSS and it is available on the Revenue website:

www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/communications/documents/guidance-on-employer-eligibility-and-supporting-proofs.pdf.

Question No. 129 answered with Question No. 45.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

130. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Finance if he has considered an extension of the wage subsidy scheme to include self-employed persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6859/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The legislation underpinning the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is contained in Section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020. Of necessity, the legislation and the scheme itself were developed very quickly to support the urgent Government objective of getting much needed assistance to employers and employees that have been seriously affected by the pandemic.

The TWSS builds on data returned to Revenue through its real-time PAYE system. The self-employed are not taxed under the PAYE system. It must be accepted that the underlying legislation and the scheme itself simply cannot be tailored to meet every individual unique set of circumstances.

The TWSS in its current form allows the concentration of resources to protect incomes, in a proportionate way having regard to available resources, employer contribution and the broader suite of COVID-19 related supports put in place by the Government.

As you are aware, the Government has announced a range of measures designed to support businesses during the COVID-19 crisis, details of which are available at: www.gov.ie/en/publication/fe8f00-government-outlines-further-measures-to-support-businesses-impacted/.

Currently, I have no plans to extend the TWSS to self-employed persons. However, the Deputy may wish to be aware that the Pandemic Unemployment Payment mentioned in the above Press Release is available to self-employed persons.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

131. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the temporary wage subsidy scheme; the number of companies availing of the scheme; the cost and value of refunds due to companies for each of the weeks ending 15 March to 3 May 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6887/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Supplement Scheme (TWSS) commenced on 26 March 2020.

Revenue has regularly published statistics on the operation of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) since 9 April 2020.

On 14 May, Revenue published updated and expanded statistical information in relation to the scheme. These statistics are available on Revenue’s website at the following link:

www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/number-of-taxpayers-and-returns/covid-19-wage-subsidy-scheme-statistics.aspx.

The data published include the cost of the scheme to date as well as detailed information on employers and employees in receipt of payments under the scheme.

As at 14 May, Revenue report that over 53,900 employers had registered with Revenue for the TWSS and that over 47,300 employers had received subsidy payments.

The cumulative costs as reported by Revenue are as follows:

Date	Reported Cumulative Cost (€M)
9 April	155
17 April	300
23 April	430
30 April	712
7 May	838
14 May	936

Revenue has advised me that it is continuing to undertake further analysis of TWSS and will publish updated and expanded statistics on a regular basis. These updates will also be published at the link above.

Credit Unions

132. **Deputy Louise O’Reilly** asked the Minister for Finance his plans for the credit union network post Covid-19; and the steps he will take to empower it to help with the recovery post Covid-19. [6945/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): First of all, I wish to inform the Deputy that both I and my officials have engaged extensively with the credit union representative bodies, and with credit unions themselves since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to assist the sector in its efforts to support local communities and to support credit unions experiencing challenges as a result of the pandemic.

I spoke with the credit union representative bodies, by conference call on 23 March 2020 and again on 22 April 2020 to discuss the challenges and emerging issues facing the credit union sector as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. I welcomed the ongoing work of the credit union sector to support members in difficulties due to COVID-19 and acknowledged the health

and safety risk front line staff are facing every day to ensure continuity of services to members. I noted the vital work the credit union sector is carrying out, which builds on the government's call for solidarity and community spirit which is synonymous with credit unions.

In addition to the above, my officials have had weekly calls with the credit union representative bodies and weekly engagement sessions with the Registry of Credit Unions in the Central Bank to review any emerging issues in the sector resulting from the pandemic, and to ensure smooth information flow between the sector and Government. The Credit Union Advisory Committee (CUAC) is also meeting weekly.

I recognise the key role that credit unions play in the delivery of financial services in local communities across Ireland, the need for which is heightened at this time. Credit unions account for about 4 per cent of lending to households and non-financial corporations from banks and credit unions and represent approximately one third of the consumer credit market. Credit unions are well positioned to provide access to credit to support the recovery from the current crisis.

The economic outlook arising by virtue of COVID-19 presents an unwelcome challenge to the sector, particularly the reduced demand for new lending. As a result it was agreed that the CUAC would report to me by 30 June on challenges and opportunities for the sector, incorporating implications of COVID-19, the role credit unions could play in the economic recovery and any relevant recommendations.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

133. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address the issue of late payroll submissions to the Revenue Commissioners by accountancy firms whose business was affected by Covid-19; if the Revenue Commissioners will extend deadlines for late submissions due to Covid-19 interruptions such as in a case (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6962/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that all cases which have applied for refunds under the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) and which were rejected on the basis of failing to meet the eligibility criteria are reviewed by Revenue.

The TWSS builds on data returned to Revenue through its real-time PAYE system. It must be accepted that the underlying legislation and the scheme itself simply cannot be tailored to meet every individual unique set of circumstances for either employers or employees. The core principles of the scheme, as prescribed in the underlying law, are that –

- the business is suffering significant negative economic impact due to the pandemic,
- the employees were on the payroll at 29 February 2020, and
- the employer had fulfilled its PAYE reporting obligations for February 2020 by 15 March 2020.

Accordingly, the TWSS can only operate in respect of an employee, whether full-time or part-time, who was on the payroll of the employer as at 29 February 2020. Thus, where an employer has not met its statutory PAYE reporting obligations for February 2020 by 15 March 2020, then the employer is not eligible to participate in the scheme. These requirements of the TWSS were critical safeguards against abuse and exploitation of the scheme. PAYE legislation requires employers to report their payroll to Revenue in real time as the payroll is run.

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Arising from the ongoing review of specific cases since the TWSS started, it became apparent to Revenue that a number of employers were unable to access the scheme because they failed the 15 March 2020 rule but had qualified under all other conditions of the scheme and are otherwise tax compliant. Given the purpose of the scheme to maintain the link between the employee and employer, Revenue decided, under its care and management provisions, to allow such employers access to the scheme, provided:

- the employees in respect of whom the wage subsidy is claimed were included on the employer's payroll on 29 February 2020,
- the February 2020 payroll submissions were submitted to Revenue before 1 April 2020, and
- the payroll submissions for all previous months were submitted to Revenue before 15 March 2020.

Having regard to any particular extenuating circumstances that may apply in a specific case, I am advised by Revenue that, having regard to the overall criteria as set out in my reply, Revenue is happy to engage with a business as to how those extenuating circumstances may be able to be addressed for the purposes of the TWSS.

Question No. 134 answered with Question No. 54.

Cycle to Work Scheme

135. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if the cycle-to-work scheme will be amended to eliminate the five year limit in order that those who have had bikes stolen can get a new bike, even if they have not reached the five year limit in the interest of public health and climate change and to encourage the increase of cycling as a preferred mode of transport; if those in receipt of social welfare payments including the Covid-19 payment will be allowed to access a similar scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7016/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Section 118(5G) of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 provides for the cycle to work scheme. This scheme provides an exemption from benefit-in-kind where an employer purchases a bicycle and associated safety equipment up to a maximum of €1,000 for an employee to use, in whole or in part, to travel to work.

The purpose of the cycle to work scheme, introduced by the Finance (No. 2) Act 2008, is to encourage more employees to cycle to and from work, or between work places, thereby contributing to lowering carbon emissions, reducing traffic congestion and improving health and fitness levels.

The legislation only allows for one purchase of a bicycle in respect of an employee in a five-year period irrespective of whether the bicycle was used for the full period or not. It operates on a self-assessment basis using straightforward rules. Any deviation from the current system would involve additional administrative procedures for either or both Revenue and employers in relation to the verification of loss, theft, insurance recovery, etc. As this runs counter to the administrative simplicity of the existing provisions, it would not be appropriate to alter the existing scheme.

Anyone obtaining a bicycle under the scheme would therefore be advised to ensure it is covered by insurance.

It is not clear what the Deputy intends as a similar scheme for those in receipt of social welfare payments. Benefit-in-kind is a charge to tax that applies where an employer provides an employee with a benefit such as a bicycle, car or accommodation. As such, an individual in receipt of social welfare payments is not in employment and therefore cannot qualify for the scheme.

Departmental Contracts

136. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance the amount spent on external consultants by his Department in 2019; the average hourly rate; if caps or limits on such spending are in place; the way in which conflicts of interest are managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7281/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): My Department agrees an operational budget each year during the estimates process, this includes an allocation for consultancy expenditure.

Information on consultancy expenditure is regularly published on my Department’s website, most recently for Q1 2020.

The amount my Department has spent on external consultants in 2019 is contained in the following table.

Where hourly rates have been charged, these are considered commercially sensitive, and therefore my Department is not in a position to make this information available.

In terms of the management of conflicts of interest, declaration forms are issued to Evaluation Committee members in advance of all tender evaluations taking place. Evaluators are required to declare that they are not aware of any actual or potential conflict of interest with any of the bidders that have submitted tender responses. Any existing conflicts of interest and/or new conflicts of interest that arise during the term of the contract, must be immediately disclosed to the Department’s Compliance Officer.

Provider	Description	Payment YTD 2019* (€ or €eq.)
Indecon	Economic Consultancy	€530,205.03
William Fry	Legal Advice	€389,775.92
Fitzpatrick Associates	SME Credit Demand Survey	€147,477.00
Merc Partners	Recruitment Consultancy	€69,966.26
Public Appointments Service	Board Recruitment	€46,022.50
Arthur Cox	Legal Advice	€38,507.63
Daniel J. Edelman Ireland Ltd	Provision of specialist advice on using social media in overseas markets to promote Ireland for Finance	€24,395.00
Grant Thornton Consulting Ltd	A review of the business model of the Department’s in-house Print Room service, with recommendations for a future model of service delivery and opportunities for improvement.	€23,985.00

Provider	Description	Payment YTD 2019* (€ or €eq.)
Central Bank of Ireland	Financial Stability Group's work on systemic crisis management in 2018	€16,810.00
Europus	Translation Services	€334.31
Total		€1,287,478.65

Brexit Preparations

137. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the necessary infrastructure is in place at each port and airport in the event the UK does not seek an extension to the Brexit transition period and will from January 2021 trade under WTO rules; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6277/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As a consequence of Brexit, physical infrastructure will be required for customs, SPS and health checks and controls at Dublin Port, Rosslare Europort and Dublin Airport.

The Office of Public Works on behalf of the Revenue Commissioners; the Department of Agriculture, Food & the Marine; the Department of Health; and the Department of Transport, Tourism & Sport has been developing infrastructure in these ports and airports for the past 18 months.

In the lead up to the end of the January 2020 Brexit deadline, arrangements were finalised to ensure that sufficient infrastructure was in place in Dublin Port, Rosslare Europort and Dublin Airport to provide an emergency response to a no-deal Brexit. Since then work has continued to develop further this infrastructure to ensure that facilities will be in place regardless of the manner of the UK withdrawal.

Flood Relief Schemes

138. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when he expects to receive a report into the Glanmire flood relief scheme. [6574/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): The Office of Public Works, under the provisions of the Arterial Drainage Acts, has submitted the proposal for the Glashaboy Flood Relief Scheme, accompanied by an Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR) and Natura Impact Statement (NIS), to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform for formal Confirmation.

On foot of the European Union (Environmental Impact Assessment) (Arterial Drainage) Regulations 2019, which were published in Iris Oifigiúil on 27 September 2019, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform has undertaken an environmental assessment of the proposed scheme in line with required legislative requirements. This involved an independent assessment of the EIAR / NIS and a public consultation process.

On the 5 May 2020, the Office of Public Works received correspondence from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform that the independent assessment is now complete. This correspondence has requested, pursuant to section 7(B) sub-section 4 of the 2019 European Union (Environmental Impact Assessment) (Arterial Drainage) Regulations, certain items of further information that are required to complete the process. My Office is currently review-

ing the additional information requested with a view to reverting to the Department shortly in respect of same.

The procurement and appointment of a Contractor will be progressed for this scheme following formal Ministerial Confirmation. The flood relief scheme will be funded from within the allocated €1 billion for flood risk management over the period 2018-2027. Provision for the cost of the Scheme is included in the Office of Public Works' multi annual capital allocation.

OPW is committed to funding this project and attends monthly steering meetings to offer every assistance to Cork City Council to ensure a contractor is engaged, and the works commence, as soon as possible.

Departmental Contracts

139. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his Department has engaged the use of external consultants from 1 January 2020 to date; the details and costs of such engagements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5535/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to advise the Deputy that details of the consultancy spend by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is regularly updated and published on gov.ie. In this context, details of this spend since the Department's establishment in 2011 up to the end of April 2020 can be found at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/8b97d6-consultancy-costs/.

Departmental Correspondence

140. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if correspondence will be published from the Secretary General to the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment based on a draft of the Climate Action Plan dated 16 April 2019, together with subsequent correspondence received or sent by his Department in this exchange; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5539/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): In the course of supporting the development and implementation of Government policy, in the administration of the Civil Service and in a whole range of other contexts, my Department engages in extensive correspondence with other Departments and public bodies, as well as various stakeholders outside the Civil and Public Service where relevant. This is particularly the case in respect of major whole-of-Government policies with significant expenditure implications, including the Climate Action Plan.

I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department does not publish records of this nature but may release them in specific contexts, including for example on foot of requests received under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2014. In general terms, the FOI Act provides for access, to the greatest extent possible consistent with the public interest and the right to privacy, to records in the possession of public bodies such as my Department. Specific exemptions may apply depending on the circumstances, which, together with timeframes for reply to such requests, are set out in the FOI legislation.

Departmental Staff

141. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to relocate civil servants who commute long distances to work using the bus or train that run the risk of infecting vulnerable members of their household on their return; if remote working can be put in place in all Departments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5713/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Guidance issued by my Department states that, during this period of COVID-19, public service employers should facilitate flexible working including working from home, where possible, in circumstances where employees are living with at risk individuals. Where it is not possible to perform one's role at home and the employee is required to attend a workplace as an essential worker, they should follow the HSE guidelines on social distancing to minimise risk of transmission. There are other flexible working options that employers can offer to employees in addition to home working arrangements e.g. staggered hours, wider opening hours. These measures can help facilitate segregation of the workforce and social distancing as well as support employees in managing caring responsibilities at home.

As per the Government announcements throughout March and April, everyone was required to stay at home in all circumstances until 18 May 2020, unless they met certain criteria, one of which is for the purposes of work for an essential service that cannot be done from home. Only essential workers who could not work from home were present in the physical workplace, and this remains the case until the easing of restrictions is implemented via the five phases of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. One of the principles in all five stages of the roadmap is that remote working is to continue for those who can do so and the civil and public service will be following this principle.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

142. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the cost of each of the Covid-19 measures per week since they were introduced in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6088/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis, Government has put in place a number of expenditure measures to protect incomes, support businesses and ensure that our Health Service is in a position to provide a robust public health response. In particular, as outlined in the Stability Programme Update (SPU) the significant portion of the additional voted expenditure arising from the Covid-19 measures is across the Health and Employment Affairs and Social Protection Vote Groups. Further detail on the expenditure trends for these Departments is set out below.

In the area of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, there are a number of key measures. These include the Covid-19 Illness Benefit, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS). As outlined in the SPU, the estimated cost of these measures over a 12 week period is in the range of €4 billion to €4½ billion, with the introduction of the PUP and the TWSS reducing the level of expenditure on the Sick Pay and Illness Benefit Scheme over this period. In addition, as outlined in the SPU there will also be higher expenditure on income supports over the rest of 2020, reflecting the unemployment forecasts at that time.

The expenditure figures published with the March Exchequer Returns reflected expenditure in respect of the PUP and TWSS of over €0.1 billion, with the cumulative amount included in the April expenditure figures being over €1½ billion.

It is expected that 585,000 people will receive the Pandemic Unemployment Payment during the week commencing 18th May 2020, at a cost of just over €0.2 billion. The number of persons availing of the scheme and the weekly expenditure since its introduction up to 11 May are outlined in the following table:

Payment on	Recipients	Expenditure €m
24th March 2020	58,739	11.9
31st March 2020	283,038	99.1
7th April 2020	497,626	174.2
14th April 2020	528,343	184.9
21st April 2020	583,317	204.2
28th April 2020	590,976	206.8
5th May 2020	602,106	210.7
11 May 2020	589,638	206.5

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection publishes detailed information on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment on their website (most recent update available here:

www.gov.ie/en/press-release/a49552-update-on-payments-awarded-for-covid-19-pandemic-unemployment-paymen/

on a regular basis. This includes details relating to the cost of the scheme, number of recipients as well as county and sector breakdown of payments. Details of payments on the Covid-19 Illness Benefit are also published.

In relation to the TWSS, since 9 April 2020 Revenue has published statistics on the operation of the TWSS on a regular basis. As outlined in the report published on 9 April, the cumulative value of payments made under the scheme at that point in time was €155 million. The Report published on 30 April outlined cumulative payments of €712 million. On 14 May, Revenue published updated and expanded statistical information in relation to the scheme. At that time the cumulative value of the payments under the scheme was €936 million. The statistics are available on the Revenue website.

www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/number-of-taxpayers-and-returns/covid-19-wage-subsidy-scheme-statistics.aspx

The data published include the cost of the scheme to date, numbers of employers and employees in receipt of payments under the scheme and breakdowns of the employee and employer numbers by size of business, sector of activity, location and number of employees. I am advised that Revenue is continuing to undertake further analysis of TWSS and will publish updated and expanded statistics on a regular basis. These updates will be published at the link noted above.

At end-April, gross voted current expenditure on the Health Vote was €6,160 million, which is €569 million or 10.2% ahead of profile, reflecting the response to Covid-19 in this sector. At the end of March, Health current expenditure was €205 million ahead of profile, reflecting an additional draw down by the Department of Health for the HSE in relation to Covid-19.

Civil Service

143. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform further

to Parliamentary Question No. 251 of 11 July 2019, if the latest information to date will be provided in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6261/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As advised in previous replies to Questions No. 53934/18 of 18/12/2018, No. 17264/19 of 16/04/2019 and No. 251 of 11/07/2019, an applicant may express a preference for mobility for up to 3 out of 46 Zones with an option to apply for any, or all organisations in Zone 1 to Zone 45, and up to 5 organisations in Zone 46 (Dublin). Staff members can apply for mobility within their current zone as well as other zones. A number of mobility zones also have an option to include or exclude a choice of satellite towns.

There are currently 1,044 staff members (541 COs and 503 EOs), based in Zone 46 (Dublin), with applications for Mobility to organisations located outside of Dublin (see breakdown in table below).

There are 93 staff members (61COs and 32 EOs), based in locations outside of Dublin, with applications for mobility to organisations located in Zone 46.

Phase 2 of the scheme which will facilitate the general Civil Service grades of AO, HEO and AP for mobility will launch at a later date.

Further information on the Mobility scheme is available to view at

<http://hr.per.gov.ie/civil-service-mobility/>.

Organisations	CO	EO	Grand Total
Agriculture, Food & Marine	16	25	41
ATTORNEY GENERAL	11	2	13
Business, Enterprise & Innov	20	11	31
CENTRAL STATISTICS OFFICE	1	5	6
CHIEF STATE SOLICITOR	8	3	11
Comms, Climate Action & Envir	4	9	13
Comptroller & Auditor General	1	7	8
COURTS SERVICE	15	23	38
Culture, Heritage & Gaeltacht	2	3	5
DEFENCE		1	1
Department of Health	15	8	23
Dept Children & Youth Affairs	2	5	7
DIRECTOR PUBLIC PROSECUTIONS	5	4	9
EDUCATION & SKILLS	8	18	26
Emp Affairs-Social Protection	70	74	144
FINANCE	6	6	12
FOREIGN AFFAIRS & TRADE	29	21	50
Garda Ombudsman	3	5	8
Housing, Planning & Local Govt	4	11	15
Human Rights Commission	4		4
JUSTICE, EQUALITY & LAW REFORM	69	63	132
LAND REGISTRY	9	20	29

Organisations	CO	EO	Grand Total
LEGAL AID BOARD	2		2
Office of Gov Procurement	7	3	10
OFFICE OF PUBLIC WORKS	6	3	9
OMBUDSMAN	3	3	6
Policing Authority		2	2
Presidents Establishment		1	1
Public Appointments Service	7	7	14
Public Expenditure & Reform	2	4	6
REVENUE COMMISSIONERS	126	114	240
Rural & Community Development	3	4	7
Shared Services Centre	65	17	82
Taoiseach	4	4	8
TRANSPORT	11	14	25
VALUATION OFFICE	3	3	6
Grand Total	541	503	1044

Flood Relief Schemes

144. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of progress of a flood relief scheme for Crossmolina, County Mayo; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6318/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): The Government and I are committed to delivering the Crossmolina flood relief scheme and good progress is being made by the Office of Public Works and Mayo County Council to achieve this. There have been some recent delays to the programme as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions mainly in relation to additional site investigative and environmental surveys but all involved have worked hard to keep the delays to a minimum. Survey works have now resumed.

The project team is currently finalising the documentation required for formal Confirmation of the Scheme by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform under the Arterial Drainage Acts 1945 and 1995. When the remaining survey work has been completed, the results will be incorporated into the final scheme documentation for submission to the Minister. It is anticipated currently that the scheme will be submitted for Confirmation in Q3 2020.

Drainage Schemes

145. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will address a matter regarding a river that is blocked and eroding land in County Kerry (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6351/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): The Office of Public Works (OPW) is responsible for the maintenance of Arterial Drainage Schemes and catchment drainage schemes designated under the Arterial Drainage Acts of 1945 and 1995. The channel referred to does not form part of an Arterial Drainage Scheme. Therefore, the OPW has no responsibilities for the maintenance of the channel, nor the authority to carry out any works there.

Garda Stations

146. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the Garda stations within the Donegal Garda division that were refurbished by the OPW in 2019 and to date in 2020, in which the value of works was in excess of €5,000; the works carried out by station; if the works project is still ongoing or completed in each case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6524/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): I can confirm that the Office of Public Works has carried out refurbishment works to a number of Garda Stations within the Donegal Division in 2019 and to date in 2020. Details of all works where the value was in excess of €5,000 are outlined in the table below and include works funded by both the Office of Public Works and An Garda Síochána.

Garda Station	Works	Year	Ongoing /Complete
Burnfoot GS	Upgrade Oil Burner	2019	Complete
Carrick GS	Attic Insulation & Associated works	2020	Ongoing. Works on hold due to Covid 19 Restrictions
Castlefin GS	Site Works	2020	Ongoing. Contract due to be placed after Covid 19 restrictions are lifted.
Convoy GS	Windows and Doors	2020	Ongoing. Contract due to be placed after Covid 19 restrictions are lifted.
Donegal Town GS	Extension and Refurbishment of Station	2019/2020	Ongoing, Works on hold due to Covid 19 Restrictions
Killybegs GS	Upgrade of Electrical Works	2019	Complete
Lifford GS	Stone Façade Repair	2019/2020	Ongoing, Works on hold due to Covid 19 restrictions.
Letterkenny GS	Re-surfacing of yard and planned fabric maintenance	2019	Complete
Letterkenny GS	Lighting Upgrade Works – Energy Conservation	2020	Ongoing, Works on hold due to Covid 19 restrictions
Milford GS	Cell and Prisoner Processing Upgrade works	2019	Complete
Milford GS	Upgrade works to Sergeants office	2019	Complete
Milford GS	Upgrade works to Public Office	2019	Complete
Raphoe GS	Electrical Upgrade Works	2019	Complete

Flood Relief Schemes

147. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of a project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6544/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): I am advised by the Commissioners of Public Works that the Ballyvourney and Ballymakeera Flood Relief scheme is currently at the latter stages of outline design and the preferred option for the scheme is close to being finalised. The OPW and Cork County Council are continuing to engage proactively and a further meeting is expected for June 2020 to discuss details to bring this scheme forward to Public Exhibition.

My Office has engaged engineering consultants to finalise scheme drawings for the preferred option, and extensive face-to-face consultation has taken place between OPW engineers, member of the public and local stakeholders, with draft exhibition drawings and schedules currently being prepared.

Environmental surveys have been completed, with a view to completing the Environmental Impact Assessment shortly. The OPW is aware of the 'high' water quality status of the respective water body in the area around Ballyvourney and Ballymakeera. The Project Team is currently assessing the potential impact of any proposed flood relief measures in that respect, and engaging with the Project's Environmental Consultants in order to ensure that suitable mitigation requirements are implemented, and appropriate processes to comply with statutory provisions are followed. This is obviously an important consideration, and resolving some outstanding issues is taking longer than had previously been envisaged. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the scheme can progress to Public Exhibition within the coming months.

When these stages are successfully completed and, provided the proposals are broadly accepted at Public Exhibition by the public and the stakeholders, the scheme will proceed to detailed design stage and formal Confirmation by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform under the Arterial Drainage Acts 1945 and 1995, following which construction can commence.

My Office continues to liaise with Cork County Council and local representatives and are very committed to progressing this Scheme.

In the interim, Cork County Council has been approved funding under the OPW's Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme; this includes approval of €10,000 in February 2012 for the removal of overhanging growth and other obstacles to the Sullane River 3.4 miles from Ballvourney bridge and an additional €187,248 approved in October 2018 for the provision of temporary flood defence measures.

Departmental Contracts

148. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the amount spent on external consultants by his Department in 2019; the average hourly rate; if caps or limits on such spending are in place; the way in which conflicts of interest are managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6977/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to advise the Deputy that details of the consultancy spend by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is regularly updated and published on gov.ie. In this context, details of this spend since the Department's establishment in 2011 up to the end of April 2020 can be found at the

following link:

www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/8b97d6-consultancy-costs/

It is not possible to provide an average hourly rate, as some of the consultancy involves a fixed price for a project. Where the consultancy is based on an hourly rate, this varies considerably according to the type of consultancy procured and other factors.

While no specific expenditure caps are in place in respect of consultancy expenditure, my Department only uses consultancy services when the work in question cannot be done in-house. In addition, the Department's internal procurement policy provides that a procurement process for services over €5,000 may not be commenced without establishing a clear business need, obtaining a realistic estimate of the value of all phases of the service to be procured and confirming that the required budget has been approved and is in place. In this latter context, as part of the Department's annual estimates process, business units within the Department are allocated an agreed budget within which they must deliver their public goods.

My Department has robust internal procedures to manage conflicts of interest in respect of procurement, including the procurement of consultancy services. Individual staff involved in procurement, among other things, must adhere to the Office of Government Procurement's advice set out in its guidance note on Ethics in Public Procurement in relation to probity, transparency and accountability, the disclosure of conflicts of interest, and the acceptance of gifts of hospitality. Members of any Tender Evaluation Team set up in respect of a procurement are required to evaluate all tenders in a fair and unbiased fashion and in strict compliance with the evaluation methodology and the qualification and award criteria set out in the relevant tender documents and must sign the Department's Declaration Regarding Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Undertaking before tender evaluation commences. In relation to the ongoing management of consultancy contracts, the obligations to disclose interests and the prohibitions on performing official functions imposed under the Ethics in Public Office Acts apply to all staff within the Department at Administrative Officer / Higher Executive Officer level and above.

I understand that the position in respect of other Departments will be provided by the relevant Ministers in separate replies.

Schools Mental Health Strategies

149. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the additional mental health supports in place to support exam year students during the Covid-19 health emergency in each of the CHO areas [5801/20]

163. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the progress of the proposed NEPS supports for exam year students since the outbreak of Covid-19; and the assessment mechanisms in place. [5626/20]

292. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the provision of specific counselling and mental health supports for leaving certificate students. [6409/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 149, 163 and 292 together.

My Department has worked closely with the Department of Health and the HSE on the *In This Together* campaign which aims to help everyone in Ireland to Stay Connected, Stay Active,

and look after their Mental Wellbeing throughout the Covid-19 Emergency. The *In This Together* campaign draws together the huge range of advice and support that is available for people of all ages. To support the wellbeing and mental health of our Leaving Certificate students at this time, a dedicated page on the *In This Together* site contains online advice for Leaving Certificate students. This webpage includes a series of supports on managing wellbeing, stress and anxiety, developed by NEPS. The webpage also includes links to more individualised support for students to access, should these be needed. It is recognised that some vulnerable groups of students may require a more focused, stepped-up level of intervention and the Department has worked with the Department of Health and HSE to ensure the most appropriate services and resources are clearly signposted for those students. A planning group has been established by my colleague, the Minister for Health and includes representatives from the Department of Health, the HSE, and the NGO sector, in recognition of the fact that prior to, during and following national emergencies there is a need to support certain members of the population with their emotional, cognitive, social and physical needs.

The stepped care approach recognises that at present, there already exists services that offer online text and telephone supports to people seeking mental health information and advice. These include the Samaritans; Pieta House; MyMind; Turn2Me; Aware; Crisis Text Ireland; Shine; BeLongTo; LGBT Ireland; Jigsaw; Bodywhys and Childline. The YourMentalHealth.ie website provides a 'one-stop-shop' portal for people seeking information, supports and services, including information on accessing urgent help and a mental health text messaging support service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days each week to connect people with trained volunteers. These services augment the work of NEPS and assist students who may be feeling anxious at this time. In addition, additional support services have been identified for the general population that can assist students and their families at this time.

During this challenging time the school building may be closed but schools have structures in place to support students. It has often been the case, that the first port of call for Leaving Certificate students who are experiencing distress has been their school. Schools have developed excellent and flexible systems of support. Many schools have a designated Student Support Team, while other schools have equivalent systems and structures, but may use different terminology to describe their arrangements, such as 'Care Team' or 'Pastoral Care Team'. Either way, the structures schools have in place will continue to have a key role identifying issues and students for discussion by the Student Support Team with appropriate action/ follow-up. In these uncertain times, the familiarity of these school structures and personnel will offer continuity and reassurance to students. A guidance document for Post-Primary Schools on supporting the wellbeing of students and the role of Student Support Teams has been published by my Department.

NEPS psychologists continue to be available to provide advice and support to school principals, teachers and school communities. NEPS provides consultation for school staff who may have concerns about individual students. NEPS supports schools in putting interventions in place for students with identified difficulties and in signposting to more specialist support, when needed, including onward referral to the HSE and other local mental health services.

NEPS is proactively exploring a number of innovative ways to continue to provide educational psychological services to school communities at this time.

School Transport Administration

150. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to ensure that private bus operators that undertake school runs will be provided the same 50% payment

as those operating under Bus Éireann contracts. [6023/20]

151. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if taxi drivers subcontracted by Bus Éireann to drive a taxi on a school run are to be recompensated by 70% of their earnings and not the 50% they are currently receiving; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6370/20]

160. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his Department has engaged with school transport scheme operators to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on services; and the supports now in place for operators to sustain service provision when schools reopen. [5623/20]

221. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to ensure that private bus operators that undertake school runs will be provided the same 50% payment as those operating under Bus Éireann contracts. [6039/20]

320. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he has considered an approach made in writing to the Minister of State with special responsibility for training, skills, innovation, research and development by an organisation (details supplied) for financial support for transport operators privately hired to undertake school transport work; the position of his Department on the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6557/20]

365. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the supports in place for private contractors working on the school transport scheme; if it will be ensured it is equal to that of public providers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6771/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 150, 151, 160, 221, 320 and 365 together.

School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills.

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

In the current school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, are transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

Following the initial announcement that schools would be closed from the 13th to the 29th March to support efforts to contain the spread of Covid-19, and in light of the exceptional circumstances, it was agreed that school transport contractors operating on the School Transport Scheme would be paid at the normal rate for the period up to 29th March 2020. It was further decided that a payment of 50% would be afforded for the week commencing Monday 30th March until Friday 3rd April 2020. Thereafter, the normal arrangements applied for the period of scheduled school closures associated with the Easter Holidays (6th April – 17th April inclusive). It was subsequently agreed that contractors should be paid for a further 5 days at 50% to cover the period Monday 20th April to Friday 24th.

In light of the most recent announcement that schools will remain closed until the end of current school year it has been decided that contractors will continue to be paid at 50% while schools are closed in the current school year.

My Department is not in a position to provide funding for private bus contractors not contracted to operate on the Department's School Transport Scheme.

Tourism Funding

152. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the supports being given to educational-based tourism groups and companies which are suffering a financial loss as a result of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6595/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is conscious of the issues in the English language education sector arising from the Covid-19 outbreak and has established a Covid-19 Working Group for this sector. This group is comprised of representatives of relevant Government Departments and representatives of both students and English language education providers.

As part of the wider Covid-19 response, the Government has introduced a number of measures to support businesses at this time. These measures include a temporary wages subsidy scheme to facilitate employers to keep employees on the payroll throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in order to retain this link for when business increases after the crisis. This scheme is administered by the Revenue Commissioners and is available to providers in the English language education sector. Additionally for those staff in this sector who have lost their jobs because of the pandemic, they are eligible to apply for the Government's Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

The Department has also published guidance for all students in this sector in multiple languages and has distributed it through the English language education providers to their students using relevant channels. This material provides guidance for these students in relation to health advice about Covid-19, measures taken in relation to their immigration status and information on available social protection supports.

The Department continues to engage with stakeholders on an ongoing basis to provide further support to students and providers in this sector.

Covid-19 Pandemic

153. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when he will publish a return to work safely protocol for builders, plumbers and electricians who work in domestic homes; and if he will confirm within which phase of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business these specific employers and employees can return to return to work in domestic homes. [6850/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Return to Work Safely Protocol was published on 9 May 2020 by the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation and queries in regard to its application to any particular sector are appropriate to her Department.

In regard to the education sector, there were circa 200 projects on site in early 2020 and in accordance with public health advice, work on projects ceased in March 2020. In line with Government roadmap published on the 1st May 2020, the construction sector has been re-mobilising from May 18th.

In general construction sites are opening up on a phased basis, the following sequence of

events being typical:

- Staff briefings in relation to Covid 19 duties
- Thorough walk of the site by site management and safety representatives
- Analysis of works operations, element by element, to ensure that works can be carried out in accordance with public health requirements
- Installation of enhanced welfare facilities (toilets, canteen facilities, drying facilities, sanitising stations, etc.) and arrangement of enhanced cleaning regime
- Installation of Covid related signage, ground markings, etc.
- Setting up induction process for all returning staff
- Engagement with sub-contractors
- Engagement with suppliers of materials
- Gradual return of staff building up over a period of weeks to full staff main contractor and sub-contractor cohorts.

Departmental Contracts

154. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his Department has engaged the use of external consultants from 1 January 2020 to date; the details and costs of such engagements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5528/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Information in relation to consultancy expenditure in my Department is compiled annually in respect of the previous year. The data in respect of 2020 will be available in early 2021.

Special Educational Needs

155. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the process by which his Department is monitoring the implementation of education plans for children with special educational needs in view of ongoing school closures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5544/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to advise the Deputy that all schools are encouraged to use Individual Education Plans to assist in providing educational supports for children with special educational needs. The Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate's advice is that the majority of schools are now using some form of individual education planning for children with special needs. The Guidelines for schools on implementing the special education teacher allocation model advises schools as to the importance of ensuring that student support plans or educational plans are in place.

My Department has issued a range of guidance for schools on how to provide for continuing education for pupils over the current school closure period. Additional guidance has also been provided specifically on how schools should provide for the continuity of education for children with special educational needs.

This guidance is available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-pupils-with-sen-primary.pdf>

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-students-with-sen-post-primary.pdf>

The guidance notes that there is a particular need for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) to have regular, ongoing schooling. While all pupils need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, those with SEN are among those who need most support at this time. Examples of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of pupils with SEN are catered for, are provided in the guidance documents and a range of resources are also identified for parents.

The guidance sets out the role of the special education teacher to support children with special educational needs at this time. It notes that the special education teachers knowledge of their pupils' priority learning needs and agreed targets, as outlined in the pupil support file, will enable them to work with parents and guardians to choose appropriate supports in a remote learning environment.

Special Education Teachers (SETs) are asked to carefully examine how progress on the existing learning targets in student support plans can be reasonably extended by home learning. They are asked to use this knowledge to communicate with the pupils and their parents and guardians and to establish what methods will work best to achieve continuity of learning for the pupils.

Schools should review the pupil's support plans to identify aspects of the programme that can be worked on in the home environment and are advised that planning should be pupil focused and aligned with the learning targets as set out in the support file for the pupil.

The school leadership team will have a key role in monitoring and affirming the whole-school effort to ensure consistency and promote sharing of practice. This team, comprising the principal and those with assigned management or coordination duties are advised to encourage and supporting teachers as they develop their practices towards distance learning for pupils with SEN.

School Equipment

156. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the provision of ICT equipment to students following the announcement of a €10 million fund; the funds released to schools to date; if procurement of equipment through his Department has commenced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5545/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): As part of the implementation of the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 - Enhancing Teaching, Learning and Assessment, funding of €210m for ICT Infrastructure will be distributed by my Department to primary and second level schools over the five years of the Strategy. €110m has issued over the last three years and a further €40m has recently been issued.

The additional €10m ICT funding issuing over the coming days is also part of the broader Digital Strategy investment. The funding is to assist schools to support students at risk of edu-

cational disadvantage due to school closures. Schools have been asked to use this funding to address situations where students are disadvantaged in their engagement with the schools remote teaching and learning due to lack of access to digital devices.

This ICT Grant funding issues to schools, as schools are best placed to identify the requirements of their own student cohort and to meet those requirements. Decisions as to what equipment is to be acquired and procurement of same is the responsibility of schools. While students, pupils and teachers can engage with remote learning using devices including Desktop PCs, Tablets and Chromebooks for example, for those schools who have determined that laptops are required and in order to ameliorate current laptop supply situation for schools, the Department has advised schools of two mechanisms to aggregate purchase orders from schools for laptops under centralised bulk provisioning processes. The generation of a bulk order will enable prioritisation of laptops orders with manufacturers, and so expedite delivery over and above timelines that are generally available at present. These mechanisms are Single Provider Frameworks for the provision of Dell and HP laptops respectively, established based on OGP Frameworks, and meet technical and procurement requirements for schools. Information regarding OGP Frameworks for the provision of other relevant equipment for schools has also been provided via the circulars governing the ICT Grant scheme.

Full details regarding the funding are set out in Circulars 0031/2020 (€40m funding) and 0032/2020 (€10m funding) which are available on the Department's website at

<https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Circulars-and-Forms/> .

State Examinations

157. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he sought or received advice on the integrity of a delayed leaving certificate exam; if so, if the advice will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5546/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I established the Advisory Group for Contingency Planning for State Examinations 2020 to identify and advise myself, the Department and the State Examinations Commission on arrangements for the running of the 2020 state examinations, the certification of students' learning in 2020 and any consequential actions arising. The Group contains representatives of students, parents, teachers, school management bodies as well as the Department and its agencies.

Every effort was made to run the 2020 Leaving Certificate as close as possible to the way the examinations were originally intended to be held. However, based on public health advice and other assessments, I concluded that the Leaving Certificate examinations could not be held in a reliable and valid manner, nor in a way that would be equitable for students, in July and August.

Many different scenarios were considered by the Group, such as online exams, shortened papers, and fewer examinations. None of these options would have been as fair an assessment as the Calculated Grades model. They would also have been markedly different from previous Leaving Certificate examinations and from what students and their teachers are familiar with and have been preparing for in terms of structure, format and content, over the past two years. Changes like those would have called into question the validity of the state examinations this year.

The notes of the meetings of the advisory group are available on my Department's website and are published once approved by the group at subsequent meetings.

Questions - Written Answers
Special Educational Needs

158. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to consider an arrangement for children with extra needs, such as autism, to return to school between now and September 2020 as it would greatly benefit such children that rely on structure and normality. [5583/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to advise the Deputy that decisions in relation to schools re-opening and operating will be underpinned by the ongoing advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and the Department of Health.

Engagement is underway with stakeholders in the education sector to develop contingency plans for the re-opening and operation of schools, including schools for children with Autism, in an environment that may require social distancing and other public health requirements.

This work will be informed by the National Return to Work Safely Protocol as well as guidance and experience from other jurisdictions. A core objective of the contingency plans will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

The issues are also being considered by the Primary Education Forum which includes all stakeholders in the sector and it will also be addressed by the Advisory Group which involves representatives of stakeholders from the post-primary sector.

In the interim, my Department has provided a range of support and guidance for schools on how to provide for the continuing education for pupils over the current school closure period.

Supports are provided to schools and teachers engaged in distance learning and these are available at <https://www.education.ie/en/covid-19/#14>

In addition to the general guidance that has been provided for schools, additional support material has also been provided specifically on how schools should provide for the continuity of education for children with special educational needs. This guidance is available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-pupils-with-sen-primary.pdf>

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-students-with-sen-post-primary.pdf>

The guidance notes that there is a particular need for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) to have regular, ongoing schooling. While all pupils need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, those with SEN are among those who need most support at this time. Examples of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of pupils with SEN are catered for, are provided in the guidance documents and a range of resources are also identified for parents.

It sets out the role of schools and teachers in engaging with pupils with SEN and the role of teachers and school leaders to support such pupils. It advises schools as to how best to keep in touch with parents and guardians and how to keep pupils with SEN safe and engaged in the distance learning environment.

The guidance sets out the role of the special education teacher to support children with

special educational needs at this time. It notes that the special education teacher's knowledge of their pupils' priority learning needs and agreed targets, as outlined in the pupil support file, will enable them to work with parents and guardians to choose appropriate supports in a remote learning environment.

Special Education Teachers (SETs) are asked to carefully examine how progress on the existing learning targets in student support plans can be reasonably extended by home learning. They are asked to use this knowledge to communicate with the pupils and their parents and guardians and to establish what methods will work best to achieve continuity of learning for the pupils.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is also providing a range of online resources for parents and teachers to support home learning for children with special educational needs during the Covid 19 restrictions.

In addition to the normal supports, the NCSE is providing online resources for children with Special Educational Needs who are at home as a result of the schools' closure.

Supports provided include those relating to general learning and difficulties for pupils with SEN, Curriculum support, speech language and communication, occupational therapy support, guidance around behaviour, and learning and resources on 'Visiting Teachers Support' for a teacher who

teaches children with sensory impairment

Details of the full range of supports that the NCSE provides for teachers and parents is available at:

<https://ncse.ie/online-resources>

The Department of Education and Skills' NEPS psychologists have also developed advice and resources for young people to manage and stay well when schools are closed. The NEPS advice & resources for keeping children and young people well during Covid-19 are available at *<https://www.education.ie/covid19/wellbeing/>*

Guidelines for continued provision of Guidance Counselling and resources available to support practice is available at

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Post-Primary-School-Policies/Policies/Guidance-Plan.html>

Guidance for parents of primary school pupils, which sets out what they should expect in relation to engagement in distance learning from schools, and how they can support their child in a home schooling environment is also available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/continuity-of-schooling/continuity-of-schooling.html>

I also recently announced that a special €10 million fund is being made available to support the purchase of technology and devices for disadvantaged students, including students with special educational needs.

This is additional to the latest round of funding for ICT under the Digital Strategy for Schools whereby €40m grant funding will be distributed in the coming weeks to eligible. €10m additional funding is also now issuing to schools to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

While recognising the difficulty that school closure has had for parents and pupils, particularly in relation to pupils with special educational needs, my Department will continue to support and encourage schools to provide as much continuity of education as possible for such pupils, while continuing to engage with public health officials and stakeholders in relation to when schools may re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

State Examinations

159. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which he will determine results for students repeating their leaving certificate examinations, studying from home and not attending schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5586/20]

226. **Deputy Hildegarde Naughton** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the process that has been put in place to grade leaving certificate students that study subjects not on an individual school curriculum, that is, applied maths, that study subjects without being enrolled in a secondary school, or are mature students in view of the cancellation of the leaving certificate 2020; his views on whether they should not be disenfranchised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6104/20]

240. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which the system of calculated grades for the leaving certificate will apply in respect of students that have been home schooled and that have not had consistent contact with a single teacher; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6207/20]

251. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will provide guidance to secondary schools to ensure that predictive grades are provided for subjects that may be taught outside the secondary school of the student (details supplied). [6242/20]

253. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the case of a person (details supplied) will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6250/20]

257. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which the leaving certificate 2020 calculated grades will accommodate students that are taking a subject outside school. [6326/20]

268. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position regarding students that are repeating one or two subjects in their leaving certificate in order that they could get sufficient points to get into college in the academic year 2021 in certain circumstances (details supplied); the measures which will be put in place for predictive grading in these situations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6344/20]

274. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if measures will be taken to grade leaving certificate students that are not attending school but that have previously completed six years of secondary education in a school that still has a record of their performance; and if the teachers in that former school can play a role in assessing the student. [6364/20]

282. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the approach his Department is expecting to take to provide calculated grades for students that are repeating the leaving certificate or a particular subject or that are taking a subject outside a traditional school setting in view of the fact that there may not be the same knowledge of the student or may not be the same evidence basis; and the guidance to ensure they are given a calculated

grade. [6399/20]

284. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if those that are home schooled will get a calculated grade. [6401/20]

298. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the assessment criteria that will be used for leaving certificate students that do not attend classes but planned to sit exams such as native speakers taking language exams; and the assessment criteria that will be used for those planning to take non-circular language exams such as Arabic. [6443/20]

304. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the steps he plans to take to facilitate external students such as mature students taking the leaving certificate to allow them access to primary school teaching or students whose first language is not taught in their school taking a language exam in their mother tongue or students self-studying mathematics to satisfy career or study requirements none of whom will be able to avail of predictive grades in view of the cancellation of the leaving certificate. [6480/20]

311. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which predicted grades will be applied to external candidates or candidates not attached to a school but had expected to sit the leaving certificate in 2020; the number of external candidates registered to sit the 2020 leaving certificate that were not attached to a secondary school; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6504/20]

315. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the consideration and contingency plans being put in place for leaving certificate students taking extra subjects outside school; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6532/20]

328. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if clarity will be provided regarding predicted leaving certificate grades in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6593/20]

330. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the protocols for schools to grade leaving certificate students studying a subject outside school such as agricultural science, music, Polish and so on; the person or body that grades the students; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6600/20]

355. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the plans in place for leaving certificate students that are repeating the year in circumstances in which they have studied some subjects outside of school and had intended to sit exams in those subjects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6697/20]

364. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the protocols in place for leaving certificate students that were home-schooled in the 2019-2020 term; the protocols in place for students that do not have a standard classroom exam history on file; the protocols in place for students that took the leaving certificate exam in 2019 and intend to resit in 2020 having moved school for some subjects and home-schooling for others; the protocols in place for others in similar anomalous positions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6770/20]

391. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the mechanisms that will be put in place to award grades to leaving certificate students that have been studying an extra subject outside of school in order to have flexibility to choose their most successful subjects for CAO points; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6911/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions

Nos. 159, 226, 240, 251, 253, 257, 268, 274, 282, 284, 298, 304, 311, 315, 328, 330, 355, 364 and 391 together.

Where a student is studying one or more subjects outside of a recognised school, my Department will be flexible in accepting estimated marks and rankings from other schools or colleges, and will look at this issue on a case-by-case basis. In general, I can say that, provided an estimated mark and ranking can be generated from a teacher in a way that is fair to all candidates, my Department will seek to provide a calculated grade. Students will be able to use this calculated grade in the same way as a Leaving Certificate grade to satisfy minimum entry requirements.

For students in receipt of home tuition with an association to a recognised school, the guidance will provide information for school authorities to engage with the home tutor in arriving at a decision. Whether a valid estimate of performance can be provided will depend on whether the home tutor is a registered teacher and where the school is satisfied with the evidence used to support the judgment.

If a student has moved school recently and the length of time is such that the teacher considers that do not have enough evidence to make a sound judgement, then the teacher should consult school management about acquiring additional information from the student's previous school.

There are 2,858 external candidates entered to sit the Leaving Certificate exams for 2020. A significant number of these candidates are studying in an alternative setting such as a private college.

Question No. 160 answered with Question No. 150.

State Examinations

161. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the membership of the advisory group of stakeholders set up to assist in planning for the State examinations since the outbreak of Covid-19; the mechanisms in place for students to input to the work of the advisory group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5624/20]

162. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the dates on which the advisory group of stakeholders met to discuss the State examinations since the outbreak of Covid-19; and if he will publish the minutes of the meetings and recommendations of the group. [5625/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 161 and 162 together.

As part of planning for the State examinations, I established an advisory group of stakeholders, including representatives of students, parents, teachers, the management and leadership of schools, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the State Examinations Commission, and officials of my Department, including the National Educational Psychological Service. A representative of the Higher Education Authority also attends all meetings of the Advisory Group as an observer. This group has provided very useful feedback and assistance regarding the decision-making about the examinations. I wish to acknowledge the positive engagement with unions, management bodies, the further education and training and higher education sectors on all of the issues involved.

20 May 2020

The Advisory Group held meetings on the following dates: 17, 22, 24 and 29 April, and 1, 6, 13 and 15 May. Further meetings are planned. Details of the Advisory Group on Contingency Planning for State Examinations 2020 have been published on my Department's website. The webpage contains details on the purpose of the group, the terms of reference and the membership of the group. The webpage also includes a link to meeting documentation and agreed minutes of meetings.

Question No. 163 answered with Question No. 149.

Third Level Admissions

164. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the contingency plans to oversee the admissions process for further and higher education for the 2020-2021 academic year. [5627/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): As I announced on Friday 8th May, a decision has been made to postpone the Leaving Certificate and to offer students a system of calculated grades. These calculated grades will form the basis of admission to further and higher education in the same way that Leaving Certificate grades are used.

Students' calculated grades will be transferred directly to the CAO, in the same way that examination results usually are. The CAO timelines will run as close as possible to normal to allow for students to take up offers and to transition to tertiary education.

Students will also have the option to sit the Leaving Certificate exams at a later stage in the year. Those who receive an improved CAO offer on foot of these results will receive a deferred offer to start their course in the 2021/2022 academic year. If a candidate who has started the first year of a course becomes entitled to a higher CAO offer and chooses to accept it, attendance for the first year on the new course would remain eligible for free fees and SUSI funding as appropriate.

State Examinations

165. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the alternative arrangements for students unable to attend State examinations if in isolation as a result of Covid-19. [5628/20]

186. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the provisions in place for leaving certificate students that may contract Covid-19 before or during the expected exam period; and if a predicted points system is being considered. [5782/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 165 and 186 together.

As I announced on May 8th, the Leaving Certificate 2020 examinations have been postponed. Students will now be offered the option of availing of a Leaving Certificate based on calculated grades. They will also have the opportunity to sit the exams at a later date when it is safe to do so.

Autism Support Services

166. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if resources will be allocated to children with autism between now and the formal return to school in view of the fact there are many parents at home struggling without access to respite; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5648/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to advise the Deputy that decisions in relation to schools re-opening and operating will be underpinned by the ongoing advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and the Department of Health.

Engagement is underway with stakeholders in the education sector to develop contingency plans for the re-opening and operation of schools, including schools for children with Autism, in an environment that may require social distancing and other public health requirements.

This work will be informed by the National Return to Work Safely Protocol as well as guidance and experience from other jurisdictions. A core objective of the contingency plans will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

The issues are also being considered by the Primary Education Forum which includes all stakeholders in the sector and it will also be addressed by the Advisory Group which involves representatives of stakeholders from the post-primary sector.

In the interim, my Department has provided a range of support and guidance for schools on how to provide for the continuing education for pupils over the current school closure period.

Supports are provided to schools and teachers engaged in distance learning and these are available at <https://www.education.ie/en/covid-19/#14>

In addition to the general guidance that has been provided for schools, additional support material has also been provided specifically on how schools should provide for the continuity of education for children with special educational needs. This guidance is available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-pupils-with-sen-primary.pdf>

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-students-with-sen-post-primary.pdf>

The guidance notes that there is a particular need for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) to have regular, ongoing schooling. While all pupils need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, those with SEN are among those who need most support at this time. Examples of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of pupils with SEN are catered for, are provided in the guidance documents and a range of resources are also identified for parents.

It sets out the role of schools and teachers in engaging with pupils with SEN and the role of teachers and school leaders to support such pupils. It advises schools as to how best to keep in touch with parents and guardians and how to keep pupils with SEN safe and engaged in the distance learning environment.

The guidance sets out the role of the special education teacher to support children with special educational needs at this time. It notes that the special education teacher’s knowledge of their pupils’ priority learning needs and agreed targets, as outlined in the pupil support file,

will enable them to work with parents and guardians to choose appropriate supports in a remote learning environment.

Special Education Teachers (SETs) are asked to carefully examine how progress on the existing learning targets in student support plans can be reasonably extended by home learning. They are asked to use this knowledge to communicate with the pupils and their parents and guardians and to establish what methods will work best to achieve continuity of learning for the pupils.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is also providing a range of online resources for parents and teachers to support home learning for children with special educational needs during the Covid 19 restrictions.

In addition to the normal supports, the NCSE is providing online resources for children with Special Educational Needs who are at home as a result of the schools' closure.

Supports provided include those relating to general learning and difficulties for pupils with SEN, Curriculum support, speech language and communication, occupational therapy support, guidance around behaviour, and learning and resources on 'Visiting Teachers Support' for a teacher who teaches children with sensory impairment

Details of the full range of supports that the NCSE provides for teachers and parents is available at:

<https://ncse.ie/online-resources>

The Department of Education and Skills' NEPS psychologists have also developed advice and resources for young people to manage and stay well when schools are closed. The NEPS advice & resources for keeping children and young people well during Covid-19 are available at *<https://www.education.ie/covid19/wellbeing/>*

Guidelines for continued provision of Guidance Counselling and resources available to support practice is available at *<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Post-Primary-School-Policies/Policies/Guidance-Plan.html>*

Guidance for parents of primary school pupils, which sets out what they should expect in relation to engagement in distance learning from schools, and how they can support their child in a home schooling environment is also available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/continuity-of-schooling/continuity-of-schooling.html>

I also recently announced that a special €10 million fund is being made available to support the purchase of technology and devices for disadvantaged students, including students with special educational needs.

This is additional to the latest round of funding for ICT under the Digital Strategy for Schools whereby €40m grant funding will be distributed in the coming weeks to eligible. €10m additional funding is also now issuing to schools to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

While recognising the difficulty that school closure has had for parents and pupils, particularly in relation to pupils with special educational needs, my Department will continue to support and encourage schools to provide as much continuity of education as possible for such pupils, while continuing to engage with public health officials and stakeholders in relation to when

schools may re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

Special Educational Needs

167. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the provisions made for leaving certificate students that have learning and behavioural difficulties that would have previously had access to school counsellors, school mentorships, local Youthreach and other resources but as a result of Covid-19 can no longer access such resources; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5649/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Deputy will be aware that I recently announced the postponement of the 2020 Leaving Certificate examinations. Revised arrangements are being put in place to offer students the option of Calculated Grades for the 2020 Leaving Certificate but also to guarantee them the right to sit the examinations at a later stage when it is safe to hold them in the normal way.

Engagement is currently ongoing with an advisory group of stakeholders includes representatives of students, parents, teachers, school leadership and management bodies, the State Examinations Commission, the National Educational Psychological Service, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the Department, in relation to the 2020 State Examinations.

Detailed guidance will be provided for schools on how to formulate and submit data for Calculated Grades.

In relation to students with special needs in Leaving Certificate year - where any reasonable accommodation has been approved by the SEC for any student, such as a reader or scribe, schools will be asked to base their estimate of the student’s likely performance on the assumption that this accommodation would have been available.

My Department has also provided a range of support and guidance for schools on how to provide for the continuing education for pupils over the current school closure period.

Supports are provided to schools and teachers engaged in distance learning and these are available at <https://www.education.ie/en/covid-19/#14>

In addition to the general guidance that has been provided for schools, additional support material has also been provided specifically on how schools should provide for the continuity of education for children with special educational needs. This guidance is available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-pupils-with-sen-primary.pdf>

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-students-with-sen-post-primary.pdf>

The guidance describes the school guidance programme and specifies how the guidance needs of students are to be addressed. It is an integral part of the school’s overall school development plan.

The guidance notes that there is a particular need for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) to have regular, ongoing schooling. While all pupils need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, those with SEN are among those who need most support at this time. Examples of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of pupils with SEN are ca-

tered for, are provided in the guidance documents and a range of resources are also identified for parents.

It sets out the role of schools and teachers in engaging with pupils with SEN and the role of teachers and school leaders to support such pupils. It advises schools as to how best to keep in touch with parents and guardians and how to keep pupils with SEN safe and engaged in the distance learning environment.

The guidance sets out the role of the special education teacher to support children with special educational needs at this time. It notes that the special education teacher's knowledge of their pupils' priority learning needs and agreed targets, as outlined in the pupil support file, will enable them to work with parents and guardians to choose appropriate supports in a remote learning environment.

Special Education Teachers (SETs) are asked to carefully examine how progress on the existing learning targets in student support plans can be reasonably extended by home learning. They are asked to use this knowledge to communicate with the pupils and their parents and guardians and to establish what methods will work best to achieve continuity of learning for the pupils.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is also providing a range of online resources for parents and teachers to support home learning for children with special educational needs during the Covid 19 restrictions.

In addition to the normal supports, the NCSE is providing online resources for children with Special Educational Needs who are at home as a result of the schools' closure.

Supports provided include those relating to general learning and difficulties for pupils with SEN, Curriculum support, speech language and communication, occupational therapy support, guidance around behaviour, and learning and resources on 'Visiting Teachers Support' for a teacher who teaches children with sensory impairment

Details of the full range of supports that the NCSE provides for teachers and parents is available at:

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The Department of Education and Skills' NEPS psychologists have also developed advice and resources for young people to manage and stay well when schools are closed. The NEPS advice & resources for keeping children and young people well during Covid-19 are available at *<https://www.education.ie/covid19/wellbeing/>*

Guidelines for continued provision of Guidance Counselling and resources available to support practice is available at *<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Post-Primary-School-Policies/Policies/Guidance-Plan.html>*

Guidance for parents of primary school pupils, which sets out what they should expect in relation to engagement in distance learning from schools, and how they can support their child in a home schooling environment is also available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/continuity-of-schooling/continuity-of-schooling.html>

I also recently announced that a special €10 million fund is being made available to support the purchase of technology and devices for disadvantaged students, including students with

special educational needs.

This is additional to the latest round of funding for ICT under the Digital Strategy for Schools whereby €40m grant funding will be distributed in the coming weeks to eligible. €10m additional funding is also now issuing to schools to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

While recognising the difficulty that school closure has had for parents and pupils, particularly in relation to pupils with special educational needs, my Department will continue to support and encourage schools to provide as much continuity of education as possible for such pupils, while continuing to engage with public health officials and stakeholders in relation to when schools may re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

Technological Universities

168. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the progress in relation to technological university status for Dundalk IT as per an agreement signed and lodged with the Workplace Relations Commission in November 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5668/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Under the statutory framework provided in the Technological Universities Act 2018, two or more Institutes of Technology (IoTs) may jointly seek TU designation through a prescribed legislative process. Section 29 of the 2018 Act provides for the application jointly by two or more applicant institutes to the Minister of Education and Skills for an order seeking designation as a TU subject to their jointly meeting specified eligibility criteria. Section 38 of the 2018 Act provides that an applicant institute and an established technological university may apply to the Minister for an order.

However, as autonomous higher education institutions established under statute, it remains a matter for the governing body of an IoT to set the institute's particular strategic direction within the higher education landscape, including whether or not to seek TU designation through the prescribed legal processes.

School Staff

169. **Deputy Stephen Donnelly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a school (details supplied) can keep its current teacher level due to the additional pressures of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5691/20]

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

The staffing schedule operates in a clear and transparent manner and treats all similar types of schools equally irrespective of location. The staffing schedule includes an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal under certain criteria to an independent Appeals Board.

The school referred to by the Deputy initially submitted an appeal to the Primary Staffing

Appeals Board which was deemed ineligible. After that decision was issued, the school provided a new appeal due to a change in circumstances in the school. The Primary Staffing Appeals Board has provisionally upheld the appeal, subject to September 2020 enrolments. The school has been notified in this regard.

Student Accommodation

170. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he has been in discussions with the University of Limerick in relation to its approach to refund students for the cost of their accommodation during the Covid-19 crisis; the assistance or support that will be made available to students and their families in situations in which no refunds are provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5696/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is working with representatives from the higher education sector to address the challenges faced by students in this difficult time. I understand based on the information available to me that the majority of students in university-owned accommodation will receive pro-rata refunds if they have vacated their accommodation.

I have called on the University of Limerick to join with the other universities and offer refunds to students who have left, however universities are autonomous bodies and its not within my remit to direct any institution to offer a refund. I understand that the issue is currently under consideration by UL, and that a decision will be made shortly.

Student Accommodation

171. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to the new campus accommodation guidelines issued by the University of Limerick recently to third year students for 2020-2021 (details supplied); if he will contact the university to seek an explanation and justification for the change; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5697/20]

172. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to the new campus accommodation guidelines issued by the University of Limerick recently to third year students for 2020-2021 (details supplied); if he will contact the university to seek an explanation and justification for the change; if he will liaise with the university to determine if the new accommodation arrangements are in accordance with the relevant regulations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5699/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 171 and 172 together.

I am aware of the University of Limerick's intention to offer twin rooms as part of their on-campus accommodation. Based on the information available to me, I understand that this decision was made in order to increase the supply of accommodation available to students.

Universities are autonomous bodies under the meaning of the Universities Act 1997. Under this legislation the universities are entitled to regulate their own affairs and administrative processes. Neither I nor my Department have any function in relation to accommodation regulations, and it is not within my remit to become involved in the details of specific accommodation provision.

Third Level Admissions

173. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of 2020 leaving certificate students that have applied for courses through the CAO system; the number of courses that are oversubscribed; the number of courses that are undersubscribed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5701/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Department of Education and Skills does not hold the information requested by the Deputy.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are autonomous with regard to management of their academic affairs including admissions procedures. The CAO process applications on behalf of the HEIs and information on these applications is held by the CAO, not by the Department.

According to figures available on their website, 72,973 applications were received by the CAO as of February 2020. However there is not information given on the breakdown of these applications, which will also include applicants who are not doing the Leaving Certificate this year. Further queries on these figures should be sent directly to the CAO, contact details for which can be found on their website www.cao.ie.

School Accommodation Provision

174. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to arrange a meeting or discussion on additional accommodation for a school (details supplied). [5705/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Deputy will be aware that the project to which he refers has been devolved to the school authority for delivery under my Department's Additional Accommodation Scheme.

I can inform him in that context that my Department is awaiting the submission of a Stage 2a report which is the next step in the progression of this project. Following examination of this report when received, a decision will be made on the extent to which my Department requires further information from and/or further discussions with the school authority in question.

Student Grant Scheme

175. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment made to students in 2020 will affect student grants in the academic year 2021/2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5715/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The decision on eligibility for a student grant is a matter for the centralised student grant awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) to determine.

The online application process for student grant applications for the 2020/21 academic year is due to open on 23rd April, 2020. Further information in relation to student grant assistance is available from SUSI's website, www.susi.ie.

The eligibility criteria for student grants are reviewed annually by the Department and approved by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

All proposals made in relation to education expenditure, including student grants for the

2021/22 academic year, will be considered in the context of Budget 2021.

School Staff

176. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the appeal by a school (details supplied) in relation to the loss of a teacher due to student numbers is under review; and if a response will be issued to school management in due course. [5716/20]

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

The staffing schedule operates in a clear and transparent manner and treats all similar types of schools equally irrespective of location. The staffing schedule includes an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal under certain criteria to an independent Appeals Board.

The school referred to by the Deputy initially submitted an appeal to the Primary Staffing Appeals Board which was deemed ineligible. After that decision was issued, the school provided a new appeal due to a change in circumstances in the school. The Primary Staffing Appeals Board has provisionally upheld the appeal, subject to September 2020 enrolments. The school has been notified in this regard.

Special Educational Needs Staff

177. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on whether a secondary school (details supplied) has sufficient special education supports for the intake of pupils for the 2020/21 school year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5720/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to advise the Deputy that DES Circular 007/2019 for primary schools and 008/2019 for post primary schools set out the details of the model for allocating special education teachers to schools.

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

Under the allocation model, schools have been provided with a total allocation for special education needs support based on their school profile.

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

Schools are frontloaded with resources, based on each school's profile. The allocations to schools include provision to support all pupils in the schools, including where a child receives a diagnosis after the allocation is received by a school, or where there are newly enrolling pupils to the school.

Both my Department and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) are committed to ensuring that all schools are treated equally and fairly in the manner in which their school

profiles have been calculated.

Accordingly, a number of review processes have been put in place to support schools.

A process is in place to address circumstances where the school profile significantly changed following the allocation process e.g. a developing school where the net enrolment numbers significantly increased.

The criteria for qualification for mainstream school developing school posts are set out in the Primary and Post Primary School Staffing Schedule each year.

Schools who qualify for additional mainstream developing school posts in accordance with these criteria also qualify for additional Special Education Teaching Allocations to take account of this developing status.

The school referred to by the Deputy received an additional allocation for the 2019/20 school year to take account of the fact that the school had increased enrolments.

It is also acknowledged that there are some circumstances, which may arise in schools, which fall outside the allocations for developing school status.

These relate to exceptional or emergency circumstances which could not have been anticipated e.g. where the school profile changes very significantly, or where other exceptional circumstances have arisen in a school and which may require a review of schools capacity to provide additional teaching support for all pupils who need it in the school, or of their utilisation of their allocations.

A process is available where schools can seek a review of their allocations by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), including the utilisation of their allocations, in circumstances where a school considers that very exceptional circumstances have arisen subsequent to the development of the profile.

This school referred to in this question also made an application to the NCSE for a review of the schools allocation of special education teachers on the grounds of exceptional circumstances arising in the school.

The NCSE has completed the review of the school and has now made an additional allocation to the school.

This school currently has an allocation of 132 Special Education Teaching hours. This allocation equates to 6 full time Special Education Teaching posts in the school, which is in addition to the mainstream staffing allocation.

This is a very significant allocation for a school enrolment of 262 pupils (2019/20 school year) and includes the additional allocations which were made for developing enrolments and an for exceptional needs which was made following a review of the school.

The provision of 6 special education teachers creates a ratio of 1 special education teacher for every 43 pupils in the school, which is far greater than the national average allocation for schools.

Should the school enrolments continue to grow for September 2020, to the extent that the school achieves one or more developing mainstream posts, then a process is in place to further increase the special education teaching allocation for the school automatically and without recourse to a further exceptional needs review.

20 May 2020

The allocations for all schools are also due to be updated in Spring 2021, for the 2021/22 school year based on updated school profile data.

I am satisfied that there are in place a number of processes which can review the special education teacher allocation for schools where necessary.

This Government is investing heavily in supporting our children with special educational needs, with €1.8bn being spent annually, about €1 in every 5 of the education budget.

There are currently over 13,500 special education teachers in schools, an increase of 37% since 2011.

There are therefore more special education teachers in schools now than we have ever had previously.

The very significant levels of additional provision we have made in recent years to provide additional Special Education Teachers means that all schools are resourced to provide for the special educational needs of children in their schools.

In relation to the establishment of special class places in the Cork area, the NCSE has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide; has well established structures in place for engaging with schools and parents; and seeks to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all children who have been identified as needing special class placements.

It is open to any school to make an application to the NCSE for the establishment of a specialised provision and where sanctioned, a range of supports, including capital funding, is made available to the school.

The NCSE is planning a further expansion of special class and school places nationally to meet identified need for next year. This process is ongoing.

The NCSE's Local Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs) are available to assist and advise both schools and the parents of children with special educational needs in relation to special class provision.

Schools who wish to open special classes should make an application to the NCSE to open such special classes. In considering these applications, however, the NSCE, in conjunction with the school buildings unit of my Department, will be required to take into account the capacity of a school to establish such a class, including the provision of sufficient accommodation space within the school.

As the school referred to in this question is currently in temporary accommodation, a development plan for the school for future years will be required to address this issue. The school should therefore continue to engage with the NCSE in relation to this matter, and in the context of its capacity for ongoing development, as the NSCE is currently considering the additional special class placements which will be required for the 2020/21 school year.

School Accommodation

178. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of a planning application by a school (details supplied). [5722/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The building project referred

to by the Deputy is being delivered under my Department's Design and Build Programme which is being delivered under the National Development Plan.

My Department submitted an application for planning permission to the Local Authority on 26th September 2019. A Request for Further Information was received on 20th November 2019.

On May 18th the documentation to comply with the Local Authority's request for further information (RFI) was submitted and a decision from the Local Authority is now awaited.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland

179. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his Department is working to resolve issues in placement hours for social care students (details supplied). [5728/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Since the onset of the Covid-19 outbreak, significant work has been undertaken by a stakeholder group chaired by the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and including the representative bodies of education providers to address issues relating to the maintenance of the quality and standards of teaching and learning, assessment and qualifications. This group has focused on the implementation of alternative arrangements, where appropriate and necessary, to meet both these standards and, where applicable, the educational accreditation criteria established by Professional Recognition Bodies (PRBs).

In the case of Social Care, the awards standards established by QQI reflect the accreditation criteria that have been set out by CORU, Ireland's multi-profession Health and Social Care Regulator and consequently the relevant PRB for this profession. Engagement is ongoing between members of the stakeholders group, QQI and CORU to ensure that necessary arrangements are put in place to maintain standards of education and training in this area so that students graduate with the relevant professional competencies that have been set out by CORU and which are reflected in QQI's award standards.

Schools Building Projects Status

180. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of a new secondary school for Ballincollig, County Cork; when the opportunity for a public consultations campaign will take place for the patron selection; his plans to have the patron selection in place for September 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5735/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department will be seeking applications from patron bodies for patronage of the post-primary schools to be established in 2021 during the summer.

Having regard to the Roadmap for easing Covid-19 restrictions, it is intended to conduct the online parental preferences element of the patronage process for these schools in September, when schools are planned to reopen. All activity by patron bodies in connection with the process will have to be compliant with any Covid-19 measures in place at the time.

Updates in relation to patronage processes will be announced on the OPPS website (<http://patronage.education.gov.ie/>) and my Department's website (www.education.ie).

School Enrolments

181. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of addressing the shortage of second-level places for the 2020-2021 school year in Ballincollig, County Cork; if the pandemic will have delays on addressing this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5736/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I can confirm to the Deputy that my Department has been working closely with the school Patrons in Ballincollig, County Cork. On this basis, I can advise that there is adequate permanent provision to cater for students seeking to enrol in second-level schools, in the area, for the 2020-21 school year.

Third Level Education

182. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to an issue raised by some final year students (details supplied) in accessing their works on campus during Covid-19; if he will provide clarity on this issue for students and their families; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5741/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Higher Education Institutions are autonomous institutions and are entitled to regulate their own academic affairs and administrative processes. Allowing access to campuses is therefore a matter for each institution to decide. Students should contact their HEI directly in relation to requests to retrieve course work from the campus.

State Examinations

183. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when a refund of junior certificate fees will be issued. [5755/20]

241. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to refund the leaving certificate fee of €116 to those that have paid it; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6208/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 183 and 241 together.

The State Examinations Commission will be issuing a refund to all students who had already paid examination fees in respect of the 2020 Junior Cycle, Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied examinations. The refunds will be issued in the coming weeks.

Special Educational Needs Staff

184. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to the fact that a secondary school (details supplied) has had its SNA allocation for 2019/2020 frozen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5756/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Schools have been notified of the arrangements for the allocation of SNA support in respect of students in mainstream classes for 2020/21. The arrangements include the following provisions:

- 2019/20 mainstream class SNA allocations will be frozen, from the date of issue of Circular 0030/2020, and will automatically rollover into the 2020-21 school year. This means that no school will receive an allocation less than that which they have on the date of issue of this Circular and existing SNAs currently in standard SNA posts can continue in these posts for the next school year in the normal way.

- Schools may apply to the NCSE for additionality where they can demonstrate that the current allocation does not meet additional care needs within the mainstream classes in the school. Applications for additionality arising from significant new or emerging additional care needs, which cannot be catered within existing allocations, will be dealt with by way of an exceptional review process.

- A diagnosis of a disability, or a psychological or other professional report, will not be necessary for this process.

- The role of the SNA to support the care needs of students in mainstream classes, as set out in Circular 0030/2014, remains unchanged.

It is expected that schools will review and reprioritise the deployment of SNAs within mainstream settings and allocate resources to ensure those with the greatest level of need receive the greatest level of support. Providing access to SNA support continues to be based on primary care needs as outlined in DES Circular 0030/2014.

Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website www.ncse.ie.

The NCSE will endeavour to respond to all applications for exceptional review received prior to 22nd May 2020 by 30th June 2020 and in that regard, it will prioritise applications from schools with no current SNA allocation and developing schools.

Applications for an Exceptional Review received after 22 May 2020 will continue to be processed once all other applications have been completed.

The exceptional review process for mainstream allocations will be available to schools throughout the 2020/21 school year.

As this question relates to a particular school, I have referred the question to the NCSE for their direct reply. I do not have a role in making determinations in individual cases.

A new frontloading model for allocating Special Needs Assistants to primary and post primary schools for students in mainstream classes only was to be introduced in the 2020/21 school year as part of the phased roll out of the School Inclusion Model (SIM). Due to the disruption caused by the Covid-19 public health crisis, the introduction of the model has been deferred for one year.

Special Educational Needs

185. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the 2020 July provision in view of the fact parents have been left in limbo as a result of the correspondence to date. [5769/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am committed to running a summer Provision type programme for children with complex needs this year as soon as it is safe to do so and in accordance with public health advice.

20 May 2020

My Department is exploring a number of options for a summer education programme for children with complex special needs.

The primary aim of the proposed programme would be to limit potential regression in learning thereby ensuring in so far as possible that these children can reintegrate and transition into their planned education setting for next year with their peers.

This may be done through a targeted level of supports to address regression of social skills and re-establish tolerance of routines paving the way for reintegrating full time into education when schools reopen in the autumn.

Question No. 186 answered with Question No. 165.

Special Educational Needs

187. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he is including special schools within phase five of the Covid-19 reopening plan; if he has considered the impact of these schools' closure on parents that are providing lengthy care for severely autistic children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5785/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): On 1 May 2020, the Government published a roadmap to ease Covid-19 restrictions and reopen Ireland's economy and society.

To assist with the development of contingency plans for the re-opening and operation of schools, including special schools, in an environment that may require social distancing and other public health requirements, my Department will be engaging with relevant stakeholders and experts from within the education sector. This work will be based on the National Return to Work Safely Protocol that was published by Government and will also be informed by guidance and experience from other jurisdictions.

A core objective of the contingency plans will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

Following consultation with the education partners, guidance will issue to schools on the logistical and curricular arrangements to be put in place to facilitate the phased re-opening of schools. This guidance will provide a framework for individual schools, including special schools, to develop plans for the re-opening of school in accordance with their own circumstances and context and the needs of their staff and students.

A range of support and guidance has been provided for schools on how to provide for the continuing education for pupils over the current school closure period.

In addition to the general guidance that has been provided for schools, additional support material has also been provided specifically on how schools should provide for the continuity of education for children with special educational needs. This guidance is available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-pupils-with-sen-primary.pdf>

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-students-with-sen-post-primary.pdf>

The guidance notes that there is a particular need for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) to have regular, ongoing schooling. While all pupils need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, those with SEN are among those who need most support at this time. Examples of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of pupils with SEN are catered for, are provided in the guidance documents and a range of resources are also identified for parents.

It sets out the role of schools and teachers in engaging with pupils with SEN and the role of teachers and school leaders to support such pupils. It advises schools as to how best to keep in touch with parents and guardians and how to keep pupils with SEN safe and engaged in the distance learning environment.

The guidance sets out the role of the special education teacher to support children with special educational needs at this time. It notes that the special education teacher's knowledge of their pupils' priority learning needs and agreed targets, as outlined in the pupil support file, will enable them to work with parents and guardians to choose appropriate supports in a remote learning environment.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is also providing a range of online resources for parents and teachers to support home learning for children with special educational needs during the Covid 19 restrictions.

In addition to the normal supports, the NCSE is providing online resources for children with Special Educational Needs who are at home as a result of the schools' closure.

Supports provided include those relating to general learning and difficulties for pupils with SEN, Curriculum support, speech language and communication, occupational therapy support, guidance around behaviour, and learning and resources on 'Visiting Teachers Support' for a teacher who teaches children with sensory impairment

Details of the full range of supports that the NCSE provides for teachers and parents is available at:

<https://ncse.ie/online-resources>

The Department of Education and Skills' NEPS psychologists have also developed advice and resources for young people to manage and stay well when schools are closed. The NEPS advice & resources for keeping children and young people well during Covid-19 are available at *<https://www.education.ie/covid19/wellbeing/>*

Guidance for parents of primary school and special school pupils, which sets out what they should expect in relation to engagement in distance learning from schools, and how they can support their child in a home schooling environment is also available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/continuity-of-schooling/continuity-of-schooling.html>

A special €10 million fund has been made available to support the purchase of technology and devices for disadvantaged students and students with special educational needs during this period of school closure.

School Equipment

188. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which

schools can apply for the ICT grant package as recently announced; and the way in which an individual student can access support from the grant. [5787/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): As part of the implementation of the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 - Enhancing Teaching, Learning and Assessment, funding of €210m for ICT Infrastructure will be distributed by my Department to primary and second level schools over the five years of the Strategy. €110m has issued over the last three years and a further €40m has recently been issued.

The additional €10m ICT funding issuing over the coming days is also part of the broader Digital Strategy investment. The funding is to assist schools to support students at risk of educational disadvantage due to school closures. Schools have been asked to use this funding to address situations where students are disadvantaged in their engagement with the schools remote teaching and learning due to lack of access to digital devices. Schools are best placed to determine how best to address the requirements of their pupil/student cohort and will have autonomy to do so, within the criteria applying to this funding.

Schools are not required to apply for the ICT grant payments, and full details regarding the funding are set out in Circulars 0031/2020 (€40m funding) and 0032/2020 (€10m funding) which are available on the Department's website at

<https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Circulars-and-Forms/>

Schools are advised to support the continuity of learning, and encouraged to make available existing devices to students who are unable to access classes because there are no devices available. In this context schools will liaise with pupils/students and parents, and are advised to maintain a register of devices, the students/pupils/teachers to whom each has been loaned and a log of confirmation for return of each device. As these devices are property of the school all schools should put in place an agreement of understanding for the loan of a device to a student and it will be recommended that an undertaking to return the device to the school, when remote learning is no longer required, is obtained from either from the parent/guardian or the student in the event that the student is 18 or over.

School Accommodation

189. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position in relation to an application for additional school accommodation by a school (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5822/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I can confirm that the school referred to by the Deputy has submitted an application to my Department, for capital funding, under the 'Additional School Accommodation' scheme.

The application is under consideration and a decision will be conveyed directly to the school authority as soon as the assessment process is completed.

Special Educational Needs

190. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if children with disabilities will be afforded one day per week in school before September 2020; the availability of additional supports for parents of children with disabilities in the provision of education if schools are remaining closed until September; the advice to parents on easing the pressure they

are under in caring for children with disabilities with access to the normal supports unavailable; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5829/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to advise the Deputy that decisions in relation to schools re-opening and operating will be underpinned by the ongoing advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and the Department of Health.

Engagement is underway with stakeholders in the education sector to develop contingency plans for the re-opening and operation of schools in an environment that may require social distancing and other public health requirements.

This work will be informed by the National Return to Work Safely Protocol as well as guidance and experience from other jurisdictions. A core objective of the contingency plans will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

The issues are also being considered by the Primary Education Forum which includes all stakeholders in the sector and it will also be addressed by the Advisory Group which involves representatives of stakeholders from the post-primary sector.

In the interim, my Department has provided a range of support and guidance for schools on how to provide for the continuing education for pupils over the current school closure period.

Supports are provided to schools and teachers engaged in distance learning and these are available at <https://www.education.ie/en/covid-19/#14>

In addition to the general guidance that has been provided for schools, additional support material has also been provided specifically on how schools should provide for the continuity of education for children with special educational needs. This guidance is available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-pupils-with-sen-primary.pdf>

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-students-with-sen-post-primary.pdf>

The guidance notes that there is a particular need for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) to have regular, ongoing schooling. While all pupils need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, those with SEN are among those who need most support at this time. Examples of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of pupils with SEN are catered for, are provided in the guidance documents and a range of resources are also identified for parents.

It sets out the role of schools and teachers in engaging with pupils with SEN and the role of teachers and school leaders to support such pupils. It advises schools as to how best to keep in touch with parents and guardians and how to keep pupils with SEN safe and engaged in the distance learning environment.

The guidance sets out the role of the special education teacher to support children with special educational needs at this time. It notes that the special education teacher's knowledge of their pupils' priority learning needs and agreed targets, as outlined in the pupil support file, will enable them to work with parents and guardians to choose appropriate supports in a remote learning environment.

Special Education Teachers (SETs) are asked to carefully examine how progress on the existing learning targets in student support plans can be reasonably extended by home learning. They are asked to use this knowledge to communicate with the pupils and their parents and guardians and to establish what methods will work best to achieve continuity of learning for the pupils.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is also providing a range of online resources for parents and teachers to support home learning for children with special educational needs during the Covid 19 restrictions.

In addition to the normal supports, the NCSE is providing online resources for children with Special Educational Needs who are at home as a result of the schools' closure.

Supports provided include those relating to general learning and difficulties for pupils with SEN, Curriculum support, speech language and communication, occupational therapy support, guidance around behaviour, and learning and resources on 'Visiting Teachers Support' for a teacher who teaches children with sensory impairment

Details of the full range of supports that the NCSE provides for teachers and parents is available at:

<https://ncse.ie/online-resources>

The Department of Education and Skills' NEPS psychologists have also developed advice and resources for young people to manage and stay well when schools are closed. The NEPS advice & resources for keeping children and young people well during Covid-19 are available at *<https://www.education.ie/covid19/wellbeing/>*

Guidelines for continued provision of Guidance Counselling and resources available to support practice is available at *<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Post-Primary-School-Policies/Policies/Guidance-Plan.html>*

Guidance for parents of primary school pupils, which sets out what they should expect in relation to engagement in distance learning from schools, and how they can support their child in a home schooling environment is also available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/continuity-of-schooling/continuity-of-schooling.html>

I also recently announced that a special €10 million fund is being made available to support the purchase of technology and devices for disadvantaged students, including students with special educational needs.

This is additional to the latest round of funding for ICT under the Digital Strategy for Schools whereby €40m grant funding will be distributed in the coming weeks to eligible. €10m additional funding is also now issuing to schools to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

While recognising the difficulty that school closure has had for parents and pupils, particularly in relation to pupils with special educational needs, my Department will continue to support and encourage schools to provide as much continuity of education as possible for such pupils, while continuing to engage with public health officials and stakeholders in relation to when schools may re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

Questions - Written Answers
Schools Building Projects

191. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if rebuilding works will start on a school (details supplied) on 18 May 2020 once phase one of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business is commenced. [5844/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am pleased to inform the Deputy that, in relation to the project to which he refers, the external works to the roof have been completed.

An internal examination of the building is due to take place this week to assess the extent to which any additional works are required. This examination will inform a decision on next steps required to resolve all the outstanding issues with respect to the project in question.

Speech and Language Therapy

192. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to amend a circular regarding criteria for enrolment in special classes for pupils with speech and language difficulties; if the case of a person (details supplied) will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5846/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department provides an extensive range of supports for pupils with Specific Speech and Language Disorder (SSLD). This includes provision for the establishment of special classes for pupils with SSLD in primary schools.

A total of 63 Specific Speech and Language Disorder special classes in mainstream primary schools have been provided for the 2019/20 school year. This compares to 60 such special classes in 2011/12. In the period 2011 to 2019, the number of SSLD special classes has ranged from 60 - 65, depending on need.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE), through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOS), is responsible for processing applications from schools for special educational needs supports, including applications to establish special classes for SSLD. Applications meeting the criteria for establishment are approved by the NCSE.

The opening and retention of a Speech and Language class is, however, contingent on the HSE being in a position to provide Speech and Language therapy to the students in the class. The availability and provision of speech and language therapy is the responsibility of the Health Service Executive (HSE).

The enrolment of pupils in an SSLD special class is managed locally by an Admissions & Discharges Committee, comprising the Speech and Language Therapy Manager, Speech and Language Therapist, Class Teacher and Principal.

Students who are not enrolled in a special class for SSLD and who meet the criteria for Specific Speech and Language Disorder, as outlined in Circular 0038/2007, may qualify for additional Special Education Teaching support; as may students with mild speech and language difficulties. It is a matter for individual schools to use their professional judgement to identify pupils who will receive this support and to use the resources available to the school to intervene at the appropriate level with such students. My Department is not directly involved in these decisions.

20 May 2020

As outlined in my Department's Circular 0038/2007, eligible pupils may spend up to two years in Specific Speech and Language Disorder Classes.

The NCSE are currently developing Policy Advice on Special Classes and Special Schools, which is now due to be completed by December 2002.

There will be no change to the criteria for enrolment in special classes for pupils with speech and language difficulties, pending the outcome of this Policy Advice.

Special Educational Needs Staff

193. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which SNAs will be allocated for the coming September term; the timeline for this process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5855/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Schools have been notified of the arrangements for the allocation of SNA support in respect of students in mainstream classes for 2020/21. The arrangements include the following provisions:

- 2019/20 mainstream class SNA allocations will be frozen, from the date of issue of Circular 0030/2020, and will automatically rollover into the 2020/21 school year. This means that no school will receive an allocation less than that which they have on the date of issue of this Circular and existing SNAs currently in standard SNA posts can continue in these posts for the next school year in the normal way.

- Schools may apply to the NCSE for additionality where they can demonstrate that the current allocation does not meet additional care needs within the mainstream classes in the school. Applications for additionality arising from significant new or emerging additional care needs, which cannot be catered within existing allocations, will be dealt with by way of an exceptional review process.

- A diagnosis of a disability, or a psychological or other professional report, will not be necessary for this process.

- The role of the SNA to support the care needs of students in mainstream classes, as set out in Circular 0030/2014, remains unchanged.

- It is expected that schools will review and reprioritise the deployment of SNAs within mainstream settings and allocate resources to ensure those with the greatest level of need receive the greatest level of support. Providing access to SNA support continues to be based on primary care needs as outlined in DES Circular 0030/2014.

Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website www.ncse.ie.

- The NCSE will endeavour to respond to all applications for exceptional review received prior to 22nd May 2020 by 30th June 2020 and in that regard, it will prioritise applications from schools with no current SNA allocation and developing schools. Applications for an Exceptional Review received after 22 May 2020 will continue to be processed once all other applications have been completed.

- The exceptional review process for mainstream allocations will be available to schools throughout the 2020/21 school year.

- A new frontloading model for allocating Special Needs Assistants to primary and post primary schools for students in mainstream classes only was to be introduced in the 2020/21 school year as part of the phased roll out of the School Inclusion Model (SIM). Due to the disruption caused by the Covid-19 public health crisis, the introduction of the model has been deferred for one year.

Third Level Reform

194. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of an analysis conducted by the European Commission of the options outlined in the Cassells report; if it will be completed in Q2 2020 as previously stated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5856/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The development of a sustainable funding model for higher education is essential in light of the centrality of higher education - both in terms of human capital development, research and innovation - to underpinning the future development of Ireland as a knowledge economy against the backdrop of rapid technological change.

In that context, a comprehensive economic evaluation of the funding options presented in the Report of the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education is underway supported under the European Commission DG Reform Programme.

The Department is working closely with the European Commission and the consultants appointed by DG Reform, who are aiming to investigate methods of increasing the sustainability of higher and further education provision in Ireland, including an examination of the funding options as set out in the Expert Group's Report on the Future Funding of Higher Education. This review, undertaken by an expert independent international consortium, commenced in Q4 2019 and is scheduled to be substantially complete in Q4 2020.

The comprehensive and detailed analysis of funding options for higher education and the assessment of the appropriate balance between provision across the tertiary education system is expected to play a very important role in informing Government decision-making in this critical area. It will provide the basis for a national consensus on the appropriate policy approach which is fundamental to Ireland's economic and social sustainability and progress and the delivery of key policy objectives under Project Ireland 2040 and Future Jobs Ireland.

DEIS Scheme

195. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of an ongoing review of the DEIS support scheme. [5857/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): As the Deputy is aware, my Department is in the final stages of refinement of the new DEIS identification model, based on school enrolment data and the latest data available from Census 2016 under the HP Deprivation Index.

This work is at an advanced stage and a consultation process with education stakeholder representatives on the technical aspects of the refined DEIS ID model is currently in progress. It is envisaged that this model will then provide the basis for development of a DEIS resource allocation system to match resources to identified need.

I am confident that the culmination of this work 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 work is complete, it is not intended to extend the DEIS programme to any further schools.

Covid-19 Pandemic

196. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the expected long-term impact of school closures in the upcoming school years including new entrants to primary school, secondary school and to senior cycles and students in year one of the senior cycle; if this issue is being examined; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5858/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is taking a number of actions to minimise the impact on schools due to the Covid 19 crisis.

A range of guidance has already been published to assist schools and teachers to ensure continuity of learning to support students while out of school. This guidance has issued to schools to support the continuity of teaching and learning, to support those with special educational needs, to support those at risk of educational disadvantage and to support the wellbeing of students. Further guidance is being developed to support students at each of the key stages of transitions.

This guidance has been developed in consultation with all relevant stakeholders – including teachers, parents and learners. There is also ongoing consultation with the management bodies and unions from both sectors on all matters relating to Covid 19, which will continue for the foreseeable future.

Schools have adopted various ways to engage with their students and these will vary in accordance with the technology and broadband resources available in school and at the home. Schools are engaging with students and parents using various means such as by post, e-mails, communication apps or the school website. Where technology permits, students may have regular engagement with their teacher/s on platforms such as Google Classroom, Microsoft Office 365 and Edmodo or participate in live meetings through the use of tools such as Google Meet, Microsoft Teams and Webex. Schools have been asked to be conscious of pupils who may not have access to online facilities and to adapt approaches so that these pupils continue to have the opportunity to participate in learning. The aim of these distant learning approaches is to ensure that children stay connected with learning to facilitate progression to the next level of their education.

A group has also been established within my Department to look at the reopening of schools in the Autumn. This involves two strands:

- the logistics of reopening; health and safety; hygiene; social distancing, etc. and
- curriculum considerations, i.e. what needs to be put in place to support ongoing progression for learners and addressing any shortfall that may result from school closures.
- The development of guidance on reopening of schools will be informed by this group and by learning from other jurisdictions who are further down the road of reopening their society, including their school systems.
- My department is continuing to review and monitor the situation in accordance with the advice from public health authorities.

Student Accommodation

197. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the return of prepaid rents to students that are no longer in on-campus prepaid student accommodation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5859/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is working with representatives from the higher education sector to address the challenges faced by students in this difficult time. The Department understands based on the information available to it that the majority of students in university-owned accommodation will receive pro-rata refunds if they vacate their accommodation. I have indicated that I would wish to see this principle applied in the case of all students who have vacated their student accommodation however it is not within the remit of my Department to direct any accommodation provider to offer a refund.

Where students are receiving a refund from their accommodation provider they should contact the provider directly for details on how this refund will be facilitated.

Apprenticeship Programmes

198. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the additional measures taken to date to support apprentices that have lost an employer as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic; if specific measures are being introduced to support the apprenticeships which are close to completion in these circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5860/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan): During the months of March, April and May 2020 inclusive, apprentices who have been prevented in engaging in their on-the-job or off-the-job training by the Covid-19 restrictions will not have their apprenticeship temporarily or otherwise suspended. The national restrictions will not affect apprentices' record of time-served, where relevant. SOLAS will again review this approach with its key stakeholders at the end of May 2020.

In addition, Department is actively working with SOLAS and the education and training providers to put in place alternative learning and assessment solutions for apprentices while maintaining the quality and integrity of the apprenticeship programme.

It is intended that the majority of craft apprentices who were close to completing an off-the-job phase of training will be offered an opportunity to complete outstanding theory assessments before the end of June. An initial communication on this issued to relevant craft apprentices and employers on the 15th May, 2020.

SOLAS are also providing updates for apprentices in regards to the Covid-19 situation on the apprenticeship website at www.apprenticeship.ie and also on Twitter @apprenticesirl. A link to information on employment supports is also available from the site as well as on www.welfare.ie

Third Level Admissions

199. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if schools will be allowed accept exchange students from Europe in September 2020 for exchange and work placement programmes. [5866/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Board of Management is the body charged with the direct governance of a school and is responsible for making decisions as to the types of activities in which the school gets involved including participation in student exchange programmes.

On the 1 May 2020, the Taoiseach announced as part of the “Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business” that schools will commence opening on a phased basis at the beginning of the 2020/2021 academic year. The Department is currently working with the Education Partners and relevant stakeholders in planning for this re-opening which will be based on public health advice.

As part of this engagement, each of the education partners were given the opportunity to outline the key issues that they would like to have considered in the context of re-opening schools. Initiatives such as the student exchange programmes will be considered in this context. These will now be worked through in detail as part of the development of the roadmap for reopening schools.

A core objective will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

Special Educational Needs

200. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the July provision programme will take place in 2020 (details supplied). [5891/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am committed to running a summer Provision type programme for children with complex needs this year as soon as it is safe to do so and in accordance with public health advice.

My Department is exploring a number of options for a summer education programme for children with complex special needs.

The primary aim of the proposed programme would be to limit potential regression in learning thereby ensuring in so far as possible that these children can reintegrate and transition into their planned education setting for next year with their peers.

This may be done through a targeted level of supports to address regression of social skills and re-establish tolerance of routines paving the way for reintegrating full time into education when schools reopen in the autumn.

Departmental Correspondence

201. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on correspondence from a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5895/20]

259. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which the practical, project and course work element of the leaving certificate will be adjudicated. [6328/20]

261. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the student records which will be utilised to formulate a calculated subject grade. [6330/20]

279. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the guidance which will be given to teachers regarding the evidence they are expected to use in the calculation of grades; and the extent to which discretion will be given. [6396/20]

280. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if mock exams, junior certificate and Christmas exams will be included to be taken account of for calculated grades; and if so, the weighting of each. [6397/20]

287. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the same guidance will be provided for teachers that are teaching leaving certificate applied students as to students generally; and if not, the nature of this guidance. [6404/20]

299. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will address a matter regarding the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6444/20]

331. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a Leaving Certificate student studies a subject outside of the school such as music and so on, if they will they have to be included in the internal class ranking order by school teachers and principals in cases in which that subject is also offered by the school; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6601/20]

332. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if clarity will be provided on the issue of project work which was submitted to the State Examinations Commission in anticipation of the normal leaving certificate; if the projects can be returned to the teachers; and when this might happen particularly in relation to physical projects such as art, design and communication graphics and so on in cases in which a scan or photograph would not give a proper idea of the grade necessary to award a student. [6602/20]

333. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will consider providing an opportunity for principals of schools to explain the profile of a school and particulars relating to the 2020 leaving certificate class in cases in which it might be seen as different to previous years and provide the data of the school such as CAT scores, STEN and junior certificate results and so on to backup such particulars in order to inform his Department when processing the school level data as referred to in part 10.3 of the Guidelines for Predicted Grading in order that individual years will not be negatively affected by the results of previous or less academic years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6603/20]

334. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a timetable will be published for each stage of the leaving certificate predicted grading process; if reports that work needs to be received ideally by the end of May 2020 will be clarified in view of the fact there are many issues to be clarified in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6604/20]

372. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the additional provisions being made for students with special educational needs that were due to sit the leaving certificate in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6799/20]

403. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the oversight measures that will be put in place to protect against implicit bias with respect to the arrangements for predictive grades to replace the leaving certificate exams; if teachers will receive training on implicit bias; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6998/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 201, 259, 261, 279, 280, 287, 299, 331 to 334, inclusive, 372 and 403 together.

Calculated Grades will be generated using a systematic model. It will combine estimates of a student's expected performance in a subject and level, with information about how students in the school have fared in this subject in recent years in line with national performance standards over time.

The first source of data will be provided by the subject teacher. It will then be aligned in the school, with teachers consulting on the results before the school's principal reviews the process applied to assure the fair treatment of students. The school then sends the data to my Department.

A detailed document *A Guide to Calculated Grades for Leaving Certificate students 2020* is available on the Department's website. It explains further how the system will work including how marks for students with special education needs should be estimated.

There will be strong oversight and control and a number of inherent quality assurance measures to ensure students receive as fair a result as possible.

Teachers are being asked to draw on existing records and other available evidence, to provide a fair, reasonable and carefully considered judgement of the most likely percentage mark that each student would have achieved if they had sat their examinations and completed coursework under normal conditions.

Teachers will use a number of records in assessing a student's performance and progress; for example, classwork and homework; class assessments; examinations in school at Christmas or summer, mock exams and also coursework. They will not be simply passing on results from mock examinations or other tests. Junior Cycle results are not being used at an individual student level as a prediction of a student's likely performance in this year's Leaving Certificate.

Detailed guidance for teachers on the operation of the calculated grades system is being finalised for issue.

Teacher Training Provision

202. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if parents and the public will be assured in relation to the full competence of the 2020 graduating classes from the colleges of education in view of the truncated school year and the consequent unfinished school placements with student teachers; his views on whether there will be repercussions for these students when they seek admittance to the Teaching Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5920/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, schools and Higher Education Institutions have been closed since 12 March. In recognition that some final year students engaged in programmes of initial teacher education may not have fully completed their school placement by the time these closures were enforced, the Teaching Council released the following statement:

Final year students who qualify in 2020 and have yet to fully complete their final school placement will not be adversely affected when it comes to applying for registration as a result of the closure of schools. This means that teachers who have been awarded their qualification will not be disadvantaged due their inability to complete school placement as a result of closure of schools.

Therefore, applications for registration by final year student teachers graduating in 2020

will still be processed and no additional conditions will be applied.

It is important to note that the statement specifically references that it is applicable to teachers who have been awarded their qualification. It is the Higher Education Institutions that award academic qualifications, which undoubtedly gives assurance to the public in relation to the full competence of the 2020 graduating classes from programmes of initial teacher education.

The full school placement requirement remains in place for all student teachers who are not in the final year of their initial teacher education programme.

Special Educational Needs

203. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to provide ASD units in Ballincollig, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5925/20]

204. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to provide ASD units in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5926/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 203 and 204 together.

Ensuring that every child has a suitable school placement is a key objective of my Department. Significant resources are allocated each year to ensure that appropriate supports are available for children with special educational needs.

Since 2011, the number of special classes in mainstream schools has increased almost three-fold, from 548 to 1,618 for the 2019/2020 school year; with 1,353 of these catering for children with autism.

There are currently 195 special classes and 13 special schools in the Cork area providing specialist support to children with more complex special educational needs.

A list of special classes and special schools for the current school year is available on the NCSE website.

Budget 2020 provided for an additional 265 special class teachers in 2020, which will allow for the opening of additional classes where required.

The National Council for Special Education has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide; has well established structures in place for engaging with schools and parents; and seeks to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all children who have been identified as needing special class placements.

The NCSE is planning a further expansion of special class and school places nationally, including Cork, to meet identified need for next year. This process is ongoing.

It is open to any school to make an application to the NCSE for the establishment of a specialised provision and where sanctioned, a range of supports, including capital funding, is made available to the school. My Department works closely with the NCSE in this regard.

Normally, special class and school places are established with the full cooperation of the schools in areas where they are required. However there are some parts of the country where the NCSE has faced challenges in getting schools and their patrons to voluntarily agree to pro-

vide special class or school places. I know this can cause much anguish for parents and families involved.

As Minister, I have power under Section 37A of the Education Act 1998 to direct a school to provide additional provision where all reasonable efforts have failed. This legislation has been used to good effect in the recent past.

The NCSE has recently advised that there is a shortage of a small number of special class places in certain areas in Co Cork, largely due to geographic reasons rather than a shortage in the county as a whole. The NCSE is seeking to accommodate these students in schools in the surrounding areas, where possible and they are continuing to work as a matter of urgency in accommodating students who require such placements.

The NCSE's local Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs) are available to assist and advise both schools and the parents of children with special educational needs. Parents may contact SENOs directly using the contact details available at: <https://ncse.ie/regional-services-contact-list>

State Examinations

205. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if primary legislation is required for the changes introduced to the leaving certificate in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5946/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Leaving Certificate is not provided for in statute. Rather, the holding of the Leaving Certificate, which assesses educational attainment at the end of post-primary schooling, is an administrative practice.

The Leaving Certificate 2020 examinations are being postponed, not cancelled. The examinations will be run at a future date when it is safe and practicable to do so. Candidates retain the right, if they so wish, to sit the written Leaving Certificate examinations as soon as it is safe and practicable for these to be organised, having regard to the number of candidates seeking such examinations.

The powers vested in the State Examinations Commission extend only to the operation of examinations. Consequently it is not possible for the Commission to implement the calculated grades model. The calculated grades model, which is being implemented by my Department, will offer a fair and safe option to all candidates to receive an assessment of their end of post-primary schooling.

Legislative Measures

206. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on whether legislation is required to maintain a minimum level of education to children in view of the ongoing closure of schools and likely phased reopening of schools in September 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5947/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Since the announcement that schools would close, and the subsequent extension of that closure, my Department has made it clear that teachers and other staff in the education sector would continue to work and to engage with their students. My Department has written to school management and asked schools to put in place arrangements to continue the delivery of education to students.

Guidance on the continuity of schooling for primary and post-primary schools issued on Thursday 2nd April. Further guidance issued on April 22nd with a particular focus on supporting students with special educational needs and students at risk of educational disadvantage. All guidance documents are available on my Department's website.

The guidance documents set out strategies for schools to use in engaging with pupils and ensuring that there is continuity of learning for all learners. The role of Tusla Education Support Services (TESS) is highlighted.

Decisions on the re-opening schools will be guided by the public health advice applicable at a given time.

Legislative Measures

207. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the legislation which may be required for the education sector in order to complete that part of the Roadmap for Re-opening Society and Business, published on 3 May 2020. [5948/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Roadmap for Re-opening Society and Business sets out how Covid-19 restrictions will be lifted. In Phase 1 of the Roadmap, which commenced on 18 May, teachers are allowed access to school buildings for the purpose of organising and distributing remote learning. This access will continue in Phase 2 of the Roadmap.

Phase 5 of the Roadmap, scheduled to commence on 10 August, provides for the phased re-opening of educational institutions including schools, third level institutions and adult education centres for the beginning of the new academic year. Decisions on the re-opening educational institutions will be guided by the public health advice applicable at that time and will have regard to the National Return to Work Protocol also.

My Department has commenced engagements with relevant stakeholders to assist with the development of contingency plans that may be necessary for the operation of schools in an environment that may require social distancing, hand washing arrangements and other measures. This work will be informed also by experience from other jurisdictions.

I attended the meeting of EU education Ministers on May 18th where the approaches being taken in Member States was discussed and I will continue to engage at this level so that experiences in other countries can inform our approach.

School Funding

208. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of correspondence submitted recently in relation to a devolved grant for a school (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5974/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The school to which the Deputy refers recently submitted a pre tender report in respect of the project in question but has included works that were outside the scope of the works approved. My Department has sought written confirmation from the school authority that it will meet the costs of these extra works. This has not yet been forthcoming and a decision on the matter cannot be made until it is received.

School Transport

209. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when a response will issue in relation to a school transport issue (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5976/20]

211. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when a response will issue in relation to a school transport issue (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5982/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan):
I propose to take Questions Nos. 209 and 211 together.

School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of my Department.

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

In the current school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, are transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

Under the terms of the scheme, children are eligible for school transport if they satisfy the distance criteria (3.2km at primary and 4.8km at post-primary) and are attending their nearest school as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language. Distance eligibility is determined by Bus Éireann by measuring the shortest traversable route from the child's home to the relevant school.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who complete the application and payment process on time are accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation.

Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis only and may be facilitated where spare seats are available after eligible children have been accommodated. Where the number of ineligible children exceeds the number of spare seats available Bus Éireann will allocate tickets for the spare seats using an agreed selection process.

School transport scheme services operating for the 2020/21 school year will be determined by the number of children who complete the application and payment process on time and are deemed eligible for school transport.

School Transport

210. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the establishment of a school transport service from Ballyhea, County Cork from September 2020 will be examined; if his attention has been drawn to students travelling from Ballyhea to Buttevant to post-primary schools and the urgent need for this service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5978/20]

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

In the current school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, are transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school. In general children are eligible for school transport if they meet the distance criteria and are attending their nearest school.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who complete the application and payment process on time are accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation.

Children who are not eligible for school transport, but who complete the application process on time, are considered for spare seats that may exist after eligible children have been facilitated; such seats are referred to as concessionary seats. Where the number of ineligible children exceeds the number of spare seats available Bus Éireann will allocate tickets for the spare seats using an agreed selection process.

School transport scheme services operating for the 2020/21 school year will be determined by the number of children who complete the application and payment process on time and are deemed eligible for school transport.

Question No. 211 answered with Question No. 209.

Home Tuition Scheme

212. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when a decision will be made on home tuition for a child (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5985/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The matter raised by the Deputy relates to pre-school education and childcare. These matters fall within the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Children & Youth Affairs.

My Department does not provide funding to pre-school services other than to early intervention for children with Autism.

Supports for childcare, including pre-school education, are provided by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA).

School Accommodation Provision

213. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason for delays being experienced in progressing a project to provide additional classroom accommodation at a school (details supplied); if his attention has been drawn to the impact the stalemate has been having on the ability of the school to meet the accommodation and the edu-

cational needs of students; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5999/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The school to which the Deputy refers recently submitted a pre tender report in respect of the project in question but has included works that were outside the scope of the works approved. My Department has sought written confirmation from the school authority that it will meet the costs of these extra works. This has not yet been forthcoming and a decision on the matter cannot be made until it is received.

Schools Building Projects Status

214. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of plans to find a suitable site to house new school buildings for a school (details supplied). [6000/20]

215. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of plans to find a suitable site to house new school buildings for a school (details supplied). [6001/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 214 and 215 together.

As the Deputy is aware, the provision of new accommodation for the school in question is included in my Department's capital programme. The project to provide this school accommodation requires the acquisition of a suitable site and this has proved to be extremely challenging to date.

I can confirm that Donegal County Council, acting on behalf of my Department under the Memorandum of Understanding for the acquisition of school sites, are pursuing all potential options for the provision of the required school accommodation including both campus and split site configurations.

A potential site has been identified. Technical appraisals of this site are being conducted. My Department in conjunction with Donegal County Council are undertaking all the necessary steps in the process to advance the acquisition of this site.

I wish to assure the Deputy that finding a solution at the earliest possible date to meet the requirements of the schools is a priority for my Department.

Schools Building Projects Status

216. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the plans for a new school building at a school (details supplied). [6002/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): As the Deputy will be aware, the project to which he refers has been devolved for delivery to Donegal Education and Training Board (DETB).

DETB has informed my Department that a planning application with respect to this project has recently been lodged with the local authority. Subject to any issues arising during the planning process, the project will proceed to tender and construction in due course.

Schools Building Projects Status

217. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the progression of plans for a new school building for a school (details supplied). [6003/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I can confirm to the Deputy that a Stage 1 meeting was held with this school on 28th November 2019. Following this meeting, the school was required to submit a revised Stage 1 report.

This report has been received and is currently being reviewed by officials in my Department. A decision will be conveyed to the school authority as soon as this review has been completed.

Research and Development

218. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to the serious disruption to research activity due to Covid-19; if his attention has further been drawn to the requirement for additional investment to allow research programmes to be extended; if his attention has been drawn to the proposal for a research and innovation fund with €80 million per year extra to support investment in third-level research, researchers and renewal of outdated research equipment and infrastructure; and his views on the need for such a fund. [6008/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I understand that many researchers in response to the changes arising from the closure of campuses and laboratories, were able to pivot their research work programmes, where possible to try to minimise the impact of the crisis on their research.

Researchers across higher education have also mobilised to re-direct research activity toward the national response to COVID-19 and these are adding significantly to the national effort to combat the virus and assist us on the path to recovery.

The research funding agencies are committed to work individually and on a collective basis when appropriate to ensure a coherent, flexible and pragmatic approach regarding research projects which have been impacted.

The projected financial impact of Covid19 on Higher Education and the Tertiary Education system as a whole is being assessed by my Department as part of its ongoing analysis of the impact of Covid19 on the education sector overall. The provision of additional financial support to support Tertiary Education to ensure that it can contribute fully to economic recovery including through the higher education research system and to meeting priority skill needs will be examined in the context of overall expenditure management and budgetary policy. The Department will continue to engage with key stakeholders to safeguard the recovery of the tertiary education sector.

Third Level Education

219. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to the proposal by an association (details supplied) for the establishment of a transformation fund to support an enhanced skills development programme to provide sustained investment in digital infrastructure and to provide capacity for the known demographic growth in student numbers over the next decade; and his views on the assessment that €180

million of an annual investment will be required in addition to the capital investment proposed for third-level in Project Ireland 2040. [6009/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): As part of the collaborative response to this pandemic with key tertiary education stakeholders, the Department has established working groups composed of experts to assess and respond to the impacts of Covid 19 across the Sector. These working groups members are reviewing immediate operations, medium term contingency planning and the review of specific and acute needs within Tertiary Education. This process continues to facilitate the provision of key information from stakeholders, that will inform immediate and medium term actions to respond to the rapidly changing circumstances.

The projected financial impact of Covid19 on Higher Education and the Tertiary Education system as a whole is being assessed by the Department of Education and Skills as part of its ongoing analysis of the impact of Covid19 on the education sector overall. The provision of additional financial support to support Tertiary Education to ensure that it can contribute fully to economic recovery and to meeting priority skill needs will be examined in the context of overall expenditure management and budgetary policy. The Department will continue to engage with key stakeholders to safeguard the recovery of the tertiary education sector.

In relation to capital expenditure, I recognise the challenges posed for the sector by demographic growth, and by ambitious energy efficiency and decarbonisation targets. The need for robust digital infrastructure has also been underlined by the experience of the pandemic. Project Ireland 2040 already provides for an ambitious investment programme for the higher education sector and within the past year we have seen a number of transformative university building projects approved for co-funding by the State. I am confident that these projects will play a key role in supporting the national recovery and skills agenda. I also consider that the experience of the pandemic provides an opportunity to reflect on the future direction of, and priorities for, higher education capital investment and will be keen to have a dialogue on this with sectoral representatives in the coming months.

I am also aware of the immediate impact on universities of the temporary suspension of building projects and the complexities involved in remobilisation. My Department is continuing to liaise closely on this with the HEA and with the institutions affected.

My Department will continue to work with all key stakeholders as we move into a further phase of planning in the context of mitigating the impact of Covid 19 and planning for a return to learning under changed and changing circumstances.

Third Level Education

220. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to the proposal by an association (details supplied) for a stability fund to provide targeted support for students and their families in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis focused on enhanced access programmes, improved SUSI grants and well-being supports; and his views on establishing such a fund. [6010/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is fully aware of the difficulties being experienced by students and their families as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. A working group on mitigating educational disadvantage is supporting on-going responses to what is an evolving situation, to ensure the continuation of crucial funding sources such as SUSI grants, the 1916 Bursary Scheme, the Student Assistant Fund, Fund for Students

with a disability and other allowances. All stakeholders in this group have worked to support learners without access to sufficient technology and to ensure the continuation of services offered by access and disability offices, guidance counsellors and counselling services.

My Department is conscious of the importance of the Student Grant Scheme and related supports, such as the Student Assistance Fund and the Fund for Students with Disabilities. These supports have a fundamental role in assisting families who are putting their children through further and higher education.

Accordingly, the following arrangements have been put in place:

SUSI

- Student grant payments for academic year 2019/20 will continue as normal. The duration and value of the grant will not change.

- Student grant applications for academic year 2020/21 will be assessed based on income earned in 2019.

- If a student or party to their application experiences a change in circumstances that is not a temporary change and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, they can apply to have their application assessed under the change in circumstances provision of the relevant Student Grant Scheme. Following such a review, the applicant may fall within the thresholds to become eligible for grant assistance or be entitled to an increased rate of grant or the special rate of grant.

- The Student Grant Scheme provides for different levels of income thresholds where families have (i) less than 4 dependent children (ii) between 4 and 7 dependent children and (iii) 8 or more dependent children. In recognition of the additional cost to families where more than one person is attending college, income thresholds may also be increased by up to €4,830 for each additional family member attending college at the same time. In this way, the Student Grant Scheme is responsive to the individual circumstances of particular families.

- The income threshold for the special rate of grant has been increased from €24,000 to €24,500 for the 2020 scheme, so as to ensure that students from families dependent on welfare will continue to be eligible for the special rate of grant. (This reflects the Budget 2019 increase to the maximum point of the weekly State Contributory Pension, plus maximum Qualified Adult Allowance for a person over 66 years).

Student Assistance Fund

- The Student Assistance Fund (SAF) provides financial assistance to students experiencing financial difficulties while attending third level. Students can be assisted towards the rent, childcare costs, transport costs and books/class materials. The total allocation for the SAF is €9.1 million which includes an additional €1m added to the Fund in 2017 for part-time students who are lone-parents or members of the other access target groups. Prior to that the fund supported full-time students only. In December 2018 a further €1 million was added to the Fund for students attending Professional Masters of Education courses, who are experiencing financial difficulty. This funding continued into 2019 and 2020.

- Institutions have the autonomy to maximise the flexibility in the Student Assistance Fund to enable HEIs to support students during the COVID-19 situation.

- The funding allocation for the student grant scheme and the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) is determined in the context of the overall estimates and budgetary process undertaken

by all Government Departments. However, all proposals made in relation to education expenditure will be considered in the context of Budget 2021, having regard to overall resource constraints and other competing demands in the education sector.

PATH Bursaries

- Funding under the strand 1 of the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) which supports access to initial teacher training by Nation

- all Access Plan target groups, set up in 2016 on a pilot basis for three years will be continued for a further three years. This will ensure that initiatives supported under this fund will continue despite disruptions in education brought about by Covid-19.

- Finally, tax relief at the standard rate of tax may be claimed in respect of tuition fees paid for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education. Further information on this tax relief is available from a student's local Tax Office or from the Revenue Commissioners website, www.revenue.ie

Question No. 221 answered with Question No. 150.

School Transport Administration

222. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when refunds will be issued to parents in respect of school bus fees for the Covid-19 closure period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6040/20]

319. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when Bus Éireann will receive approval to issue school bus ticket refunds in view of the fact that schools will not reopen before September 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6548/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 222 and 319 together.

School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills.

In the current school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, are transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

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

The decision taken by the Government to close schools with effect from 13th March 2020 was taken in the interest of protecting our pupils, their families, teachers and those members of the wider community and is one of the many measures taken to support efforts to contain the spread of Covid-19.

Given that the school transport services have not been available to children from 13th March, it was recently decided that at the end of the current school year a refund for that period of closure will be issued to parents. The Department is currently engaging with Bus Éireann in considering how best to facilitate these refunds.

Covid-19 Pandemic

223. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding Covid-19 measures in schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6052/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): On the 1st May 2020, the Taoiseach announced as part of the “Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business” that schools will commence opening on a phased basis at the beginning of the 2020/2021 academic year.

The Department is currently working with the Education Partners and relevant stakeholders in planning for this re-opening which will be based on public health advice. As part of this engagement, each of the education partners were given the opportunity to outline the key issues that they would like to have considered in the context of re-opening schools.

The issues raised by the education partners included many of those referred to in the correspondence provided by the Deputy in his question. These will now be worked through in detail as part of the development of the roadmap for reopening schools.

A core objective will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

Ministerial Correspondence

224. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a copy of all correspondence between 1 April 2020 and 8 May 2020 relating to planning for the 2020 leaving certificate between any combination of him and his office and or persons (details supplied) will be provided. [6054/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Deputy has asked to see correspondence relating to planning for the 2020 Leaving Certificate.

The implementation of the Government Decision on the postponement of the Leaving Certificate and the provision of calculated grades is now underway, including in collaboration with education partners. An Executive Office has been established within my Department for the purposes of operating the calculated grades model which is working through the detail of the processes required to give effect to the Government’s Decision. The advisory group on State examinations continues to meet, and there are engagements ongoing with stakeholders. Detailed guidance is being issued to teachers, deputy principals and principals on how to operate the calculated grades system.

In this context, my focus is on ensuring learners and educational professionals are supported in this process, and I do not consider that it is appropriate at this stage to consider the release of any of the correspondence requested by the Deputy until all matters related to the Leaving Certificate and calculated grades for 2020 have been completed.

In considering the Deputy’s request, I have had regard to the guidance on parliamentary questions which seek copies of correspondence, which was approved by the Ceann Comhairle during the last Dáil and circulated by the Houses of the Oireachtas service on 16 October 2019. I am mindful in particular of the need to provide a substantive answer to the Deputy’s request for information concerning planning for the Leaving Certificate.

I have been very open in this House about the decision-making process which underpinned

my decision-making and that of the Government. I was clear that I made every effort to run the 2020 Leaving Certificate as close as possible to the way the examinations were originally intended to be held. On 10 April, having regard to the information available to me at that time, I announced the postponement of the State examinations and certain other alternative arrangements. I established an advisory group on State examinations, chaired by the Secretary General of my Department, to undertake stakeholder engagement and advise me on the range of issues which arise in the context of examinations and assessment in the context of the pandemic.

On 8 May, following a Government Decision, I announced the postponement of the Leaving Certificate and indicated that students would be given the option of accepting calculated grades or sitting Leaving Certificate written examinations at a later date. I had regard to the assessments which were provided to me that the Leaving Certificate examinations cannot be held in a reliable and valid manner, nor in a way that would be equitable for students.

I have published material which was important in informing my decision-making, including a summary of the challenges in organising conventional examinations

(<https://www.education.ie/en/Learners/Information/State-Examinations/challenges-of-organising-examinations-with-social-distancing-requirements.pdf>)

and advice related to the mental health and wellbeing of young people

(<https://www.education.ie/en/Learners/Information/State-Examinations/wellbeing-mental-health-young-people-leaving-cert-covid-19.pdf>).

I also sought legal advice from the Attorney General.

Home Tuition Scheme

225. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the steps taken or procedures investigated to support the resumption of home tuition for students whose needs are best served in person rather than by remote learning. [6067/20]

303. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the steps taken or procedures investigated to support the resumption of home tuition for students whose needs are best served by in person rather than through remote learning. [6479/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 225 and 303 together.

I wish to advise the Deputy that decisions in relation to schools re-opening and operating will be underpinned by the ongoing advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and the Department of Health.

Engagement is underway with stakeholders in the education sector to develop contingency plans for the re-opening and operation of schools, including schools for children with Autism, in an environment that may require social distancing and other public health requirements.

This work will be informed by the National Return to Work Safely Protocol as well as guidance and experience from other jurisdictions. A core objective of the contingency plans will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

In relation to the reopening of early learning and care and school-age childcare services my

colleague, Dr. Katherine Zappone, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, has established an Advisory Group on Reopening Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare services.

Amongst other roles, the Group will be developing guidelines to support providers, their staff, parents and children return to familiar, albeit different, environments, in a phased manner over the coming months.

As the first step to prepare to re-open childcare services, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) is encouraging service providers to review the Return to Work Safely Protocol, published by Government this week, but to be aware that assistance will be made available to them in the coming weeks to meet its requirements.

Various childcare specific guidance cleared by Public Health experts will be issued to services by DCYA over the coming weeks. DCYA is also planning an opportunity for public consultation.

In the interim, funding for the provision of Home Tuition services will continue to be provided where tuition is delivered by distance learning.

Question No. 226 answered with Question No. 159.

School Accommodation Provision

227. **Deputy Stephen Donnelly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the planned completion date for a new extension at a school (details supplied) in the context of Covid-19 disruptions. [6107/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Deputy will be aware that the project to which he refers has been devolved to the National Development Finance Agency (NDFA) for delivery as part of a programme of school building projects.

The NDFA is currently undertaking the second phase of the process of appointment of multi-disciplinary technical advisors (design teams) for these projects. This process will involve a number of call-off competitions for bundles of projects from a framework. I am able to inform the Deputy that this appointment process has been unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic as the work involved has been carried out through written procedures and via remote access interactions where necessary.

Thereafter, the NDFA will ensure that the project progresses to design stage, obtains the necessary statutory planning permission, and moves the project onward to tender and 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 its completion.

Please be assured that the NDFA will be engaging directly with the school authority to keep it informed of progress.

State Examinations

228. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the predicted points system for those repeating the leaving certificate in a different school than their first sitting of the exams (details supplied). [6108/20]

236. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will put in place special arrangements for students that intended to repeat the leaving certificate in 2020 to actually sit the exam in 2020 in order that they can be considered for third-level college entry for the academic year 2020/2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6168/20]

297. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if clarity will be provided for students that are repeating the leaving certificate in a new school and that are doing core subjects outside of school (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6432/20]

356. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the plans in place for leaving certificate students that are repeating the year in a new school; if advice will be sought from their former school; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6698/20]

388. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which he plans to address the needs and concerns of students that had planned to repeat the leaving certificate in 2020 in a new school with the hope of achieving higher points in view of the fact that the teachers in the new school would have no background knowledge of the student and the student may be relatively unknown to their teachers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6908/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 228, 236, 297, 356 and 388 together.

Where a student is studying one or more subjects outside of a recognised school, the Department will be flexible in accepting estimated marks and rankings from other schools or colleges, and will look at this issue on a case-by-case basis. In general, I can say that, provided an estimated mark and ranking can be generated from a teacher in a way that is fair to all candidates, my Department will seek to provide a calculated grade. Students will be able to use this calculated grade in the same way as a Leaving Certificate grade to satisfy minimum entry requirements.

If a student has moved school recently and the length of time is such that the teacher considers that do not have enough evidence to make a sound judgement, then the teacher should consult school management about acquiring additional information from the student's previous school.

State Examinations

229. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the measures in place to deal with mature students in respect of the leaving certificate announcement; if predictive grading will be implemented for mature students repeating their leaving certificate; if particular measures will be put in place in which a predictive grade is not possible and in circumstances in which the person needs a result for this coming academic year in third-level studies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6126/20]

237. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the provisions in place for mature leaving certificate external candidates; if a tutor will be permitted to submit a predicted grade on the students behalf in circumstances in which an external candidate is being tutored; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6159/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 229 and 237 together.

All reasonable efforts will be made to provide students with a calculated grade. In the case of students taking a subject outside school, the guidance on calculated grades provides details of how schools should proceed if school management authorities are confident that there is sufficient evidence of the student's achievement to make an objective judgement.

In other cases where there is no identifiable or appropriate teacher or school engagement such cases can be considered on a case by case basis. Candidates also have the option to sit the traditional examinations when it is safe to hold them at a future date.

Student Universal Support Ireland

230. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if students that wish to pursue a postgraduate course in the United Kingdom or in other EU countries but are permanently resident here are eligible for assistance under the normal conditions of the SUSI scheme; if not, the reason postgraduate students are not afforded the same assistance as undergraduate students; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6128/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Under the terms of the Student Grant Scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students attending an approved course in an approved institution who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

In relation to funding for postgraduate courses pursued in the United Kingdom and other EU countries, the payment of tuition fees is limited to approved courses of higher education at an approved institution in the State, other than for exceptional provision in respect of postgraduate course in Northern Ireland. The Student Grant Scheme does not extend to postgraduate study outside of Ireland. The Scheme operates in the context of limited public funding and competing priorities.

However, tax relief at the standard rate of tax may be claimed in respect of tuition fees paid for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education, including approved undergraduate and postgraduate courses in EU Member States and in non-EU countries. Further information on this tax relief is available from the student's local Tax Office or from the Revenue Commissioners website, www.revenue.ie.

State Examinations

231. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding the leaving certificate. [6137/20]

243. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position for a mature student studying Irish regarding grading for a leaving certificate subject; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6215/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 231 and 243 together.

Where a student is studying a subject such as Irish outside of a recognised school, the Department will be flexible in accepting estimated marks and rankings from other schools or colleges, and will look at this issue on a case-by-case basis. In general, I can say that, provided an estimated mark and ranking from a teacher can be generated in a way that is fair to all candidates, my Department will seek to provide a calculated grade. Students will be able to use

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this calculated grade in the same way as a Leaving Certificate grade to satisfy minimum entry requirements.

School Staff

232. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a school (details supplied) will be allocated more resources for the coming academic year in order to avoid split class arrangements within the school. [6141/20]

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

The staffing schedule operates in a clear and transparent manner and treats all similar types of schools equally irrespective of location. The staffing schedule includes an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal under certain criteria to an independent Appeals Board.

On the basis of the school's enrolments on 30th September 2019, there will be no change to the school's mainstream staffing for the 2020/21 school year.

School Staff

233. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding a school; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6142/20]

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

The staffing schedule operates in a clear and transparent manner and treats all similar types of schools equally irrespective of location. The staffing schedule includes an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal under certain criteria to an independent Appeals Board.

The Primary Staffing Appeals Board considered a staffing appeal from the school referred to by the Deputy. The Appeals Board has deemed the appeal ineligible and the school has been notified of this decision.

The Primary Staffing Appeals Board operates independently of the Department and its decision is final.

School Staff

234. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the case of a person (details supplied) will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6144/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The redeployment arrange-

ments is the first method used to fill vacancies in the primary school system.

Permanent teaching vacancies at primary level are filled, in the first instance, by permanent/CID holding teachers that are surplus in their own schools.

Any transfer from one panel to another can only be done by agreement of both Patrons.

Disability Support Services

235. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on a project by a person (details supplied) in relation to outcomes in respect of the deaf community and a proposal on the measures to help create a more integrated society. [6150/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Very significant levels of financial provision are made to ensure that all children with special educational needs, including children who are deaf/hard of hearing, can be provided with an education appropriate to their needs.

My Department currently spends approximately €1.9 Billion - almost a fifth - of its annual educational and training budget on making additional provision for children with special educational needs.

This represents an increase of over 50% in total expenditure since 2011, at which point €1.247 Billion per annum was provided.

Included in this provision is an extensive range of supports to assist students who are deaf or hard of hearing, which is referenced in the findings and recommendations contained in the politics and society research project of the 6th year student, referred to by the Deputy.

In line with my Department's policy that children with special educational needs access appropriate education intervention in mainstream settings where possible, many deaf or hard of hearing pupils are integrated into mainstream classes at primary and post-primary level, while other children who are deaf or hard of hearing and have more complex needs may attend special schools or classes, which have lower pupil teacher ratios.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) provides additional special educational needs teaching supports to mainstream schools, and provides for special class and special school placements and Special Needs Assistant (SNA) support to all schools.

In the 2019/20 school year, there are 1,618 special classes in mainstream schools, of which 17 are for students who are deaf. Three of these classes are new classes, opened in September 2019.

Of the 124 special schools nationally, there are two special schools for the deaf.

The NCSE's Support Service includes Visiting Teachers, who are qualified teachers with particular skills and knowledge of the development and education of children with varying degrees of hearing loss and/or visual impairment. They offer longitudinal support to children, their families and schools from the time of referral through to the end of post-primary education.

Each visiting teacher (VT) is responsible for a particular region and is allocated a caseload of students. The VT supports children/young people, parents, guardians, teachers and other professionals involved with the child.

The frequency and nature of support takes into account a range of factors based on the individual's needs. The work of the VT involves liaising with other professionals and agencies such as audiological scientists, ophthalmology services, speech and language therapists, low vision specialists, psychologists, early intervention teams, school staffs, and with parents.

Included in the brief of the Support Service is to enhance the quality of learning and teaching of students with special educational needs through the provision of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and support for teachers.

The NCSE provide direct support to schools and individual teachers in as flexible a way as possible, offering telephone advice, a school visit from a member of the team, an in-service course for individual teachers, or whole-school training. Whole-school training will ensure that all teachers are equipped to cater for the pupils' educational needs, as they progress through primary and post primary school.

Among the courses towards which funding is provided to schools are courses in Irish Sign Language, which are available throughout the country through a variety of providers.

Additional supports provided by my Department include funding to schools for assistive technology such as radio aids and Soundfield systems, special transport arrangements for pupils, and enhanced levels of capitation in special classes and special schools.

Funding is also provided by my Department for a weekly home tuition service whereby tutors visit the homes of deaf and hard of hearing pre-school children and school-going pupils to provide training in Irish Sign Language (ISL) for these children, their siblings and parents. My Department grants the funding to parents in order that they can pay the tutors directly.

Reasonable accommodations and supports are made available to support children with special educational needs, including students who are deaf/hard of hearing, to participate in state exams.

The NCSE published Policy Advice on the Education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children in Ireland which makes a number of recommendations for the improvement of educational provision for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children, including recommendations relating to ISL provision.

Separately, the Comprehensive review of the SNA Scheme made a number of recommendations relating to students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Relating specifically to students who are deaf, the NCSE recommends Irish Sign Language qualified assistants in schools, to support profoundly deaf students whose primary language is ISL and that this provision should be aligned to the requirements of the Irish Sign Language Act 2017.

In line with the recommendations of this review and the requirements of the Irish Sign Language Act 2017, a scheme will be developed to provide Irish Sign Language support for students attending recognised schools, whose primary language is Irish Sign Language.

The Fund for Students with Disabilities supports students at third level to participate fully in their academic programmes and aims to ensure that students are not disadvantaged by reason of a disability.

A new undergraduate programme in Dublin City University (DCU), launched in 2019, enables deaf and hard of hearing people who use Irish Sign Language (ISL) to enter primary teaching.

Specialised Training for people with disabilities is funded by the National Training Fund,

which targets unemployed people with disabilities.

Question No. 236 answered with Question No. 228.

Question No. 237 answered with Question No. 229.

Student Universal Support Ireland

238. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if amendments will be made to the requirement to submit payslips for work done by a student applying for a grant to SUSI in view of the impossibility of contacting some previous employers, for example, pubs due to them being closed as a result of Covid-19. [6198/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Student grant applications for academic year 2020/21 will be assessed based on income earned in 2019.

The assessment of means under the 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 2020 Scheme allows students to disregard holiday earnings up to €4,500 from the assessment of reckonable income. The student must also have been in education when this income was earned.

In recent years, SUSI has vastly reduced the documentation required from students. Evidence of holiday earnings is only requested where it will lead to a better rate of grant being awarded to the student.

I understand from SUSI that to confirm holiday earnings, the student must submit a holiday earnings form completed by their employer. The form is available on SUSI's website at the following link <https://susi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Form-Statement-of-Holiday-Earnings-2020-V2.pdf>. Where it is not possible for the student's employer to complete this form, SUSI will accept a copy of the student's relevant pay-slips.

If the student is unable to return the completed form or pay-slips within the timeframe noted on their checklist letter, they can contact SUSI's Support Desk and an extension will be arranged.

If the student does not have access to a photocopier, they can send the original pay-slips to SUSI. SUSI will then make a copy of the pay-slips and return the originals to the student.

In certain circumstances, such as the student is self-isolating, cocooning or does not have access to a printer, the student can email a copy of the completed form or pay-slips to SUSI.

Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, students in third-level institutions experiencing exceptional financial need can apply for support under the Student Assistance Fund. This Fund assists full-time and part-time students, in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Details of this fund are available from the Access Office in the third level institution attended. Institutions have the autonomy to maximise the flexibility in the Student Assistance Fund to enable HEIs to support students during the COVID-19 situation.

In addition, tax relief at the standard rate of tax may be claimed in respect of tuition fees paid for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education. Further information on this tax relief is available from students' local Tax Offices or from the Revenue Commissioners

English Language Training Organisations

239. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position regarding English language schools and their plans to reopen in line with public health guidance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6202/20]

246. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if consideration has been given to the scheduled reopening of language schools; his views in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6223/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 239 and 246 together.

The timeline and arrangements for the re-opening of English language education providers will be guided by public health advice applicable at a given time. On May 1st, the Taoiseach announced the roadmap for the gradual lifting of the current Covid-19 restrictions. This roadmap sets out a number of phases with the re-opening of the wider education system contained in the later phases to coincide broadly with the beginning of the new academic year.

My Department will engage with relevant stakeholders within the English language education sector regarding their development of plans for re-opening. It is anticipated that these plans will be informed by the “Return to Work Safely Protocol” recently published jointly by the Department of Health and the Department of Enterprise, Business & Innovation, and designed to support measures being put in place that will prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. Experience of the re-opening of educational facilities in other jurisdictions will also be relevant.ance and experience from other jurisdictions.

Question No. 240 answered with Question No. 159.

Question No. 241 answered with Question No. 183.

State Examinations

242. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if full marks for oral Irish and music still apply in view of the fact that predictive grades have been announced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6210/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): When it was thought possible to hold written examinations but not orals or music performance tests, 100% marks were awarded for the cancelled orals and performance tests. Awarding 100% for orals and music performance tests in the calculated grade system would not be fair to students. Calculated grades are the best way of getting an accurate estimation of what a student would have achieved across all components of their examination.

Teachers are best placed to make a balanced judgement about what the candidate’s overall performance and grade across all aspects of the subject including orals would have been. This means the calculated grade will be as close to the outcome of the traditional Leaving Certificate as possible and comparable to the Leaving Certificate grades any other year.

Teachers of languages will assess the student’s oral performance as well as their written

skills to come to an estimated mark for each student. It was never intended to offer 100% for all practical or project work. Detailed guidance to assist teachers in formulating the estimated grade for each student will issue shortly and will address these components.

Question No. 243 answered with Question No. 231.

Ministerial Communications

244. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the details of his engagements to date with the British, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland education ministers since the Covid-19 crisis commenced. [6217/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): On 10th April 2020, I spoke with Secretary of State Gavin Williamson to explain the implications of the postponement of the Leaving Certificate and its implications for those Irish students, who applied to UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This conversation was followed up with a letter. I hope to talk again with the Secretary of State in the next few days.

On the same day, I also wrote to NI Minister for the Economy Diane Dodds (with responsibility for higher education) and Minister for Education Peter Weir advising them of the Irish Government's decision at that point.

Information continues to be shared on a frequent basis between officials in my Department and their counterparts across the UK (including Northern Ireland) on issues such as safe re-opening of schools, schools hygiene, maintaining social distance in education institutions and admissions to HEIs in the UK.

Contacts at official level are ongoing between my Department and UCAS and engagement with higher education institutions in the UK is also underway to facilitate transition to study there for Irish students in as much as is possible in the circumstances.

It is also important to set these contacts within a wider context. Last Monday, I participated in a video conference with my fellow EU Ministers for Education on the impact of Covid 19 throughout all Members States' education systems. These discussions were well aligned with the engagements I have had with the UK - namely, the reopening of education and training settings, and encouraging flexibility in the higher education system in terms of registration and admission of school leavers and possible delays in the publication of their school terminal examinations results. I was encouraged that all Ministers emphasised the need for flexibility and were advocating for solutions to be found that are in the best interests of our students.

SOLAS Administration

245. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when Solas will commence training again for the security industry; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that safe pass training is required for employees in this industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6220/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan): Safe Pass course providers are currently closed due to the existing Covid-19 restrictions on education and training. As these courses are currently classroom based it will not be possible for these courses to take place at this time.

My Department is actively working with SOLAS and the education and training providers to put in place learning and assessment solutions to assist the return to work for many workers in the construction sector including on-site security personnel.

Question No. 246 answered with Question No. 239.

State Examinations

247. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to ensure that the system for calculating grades in the leaving certificate is anonymised in the interests of fairness for both teachers and pupils; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6231/20]

250. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the effect the school profiling element will have on a student's grade; the way in which fairness will be achieved in the national standardisation process in situations in which a student is attending a lower ranking school but may be a high achiever and would have performed well in a written examination but may have their results downgraded as part of the national standardisation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6238/20]

262. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will review his decision to introduce a school profile element to the calculated grade process (details supplied). [6331/20]

281. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the safeguards which will be put in place to minimise the impact of school profiling; and if it is the case that school results will be adjusted upwards or downwards depending on said profile. [6398/20]

285. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will reconsider the need for school profiling in view of the fact that it has a potentially harmful effect on schools with a lower profile of results and other safeguards are in place and can be put in place. [6402/20]

302. **Deputy Malcolm Noonan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if students from more disadvantaged areas and schools with poorer academic records will not be unduly punished on the basis of the performance of those that came before them (details supplied). [6456/20]

339. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the provision to adjust leaving certificate grades in line with the schools past performance (details supplied) will be reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6635/20]

404. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the measures that will be taken to ensure that students are not unfairly awarded marked down grades due to their school expected data with respect to the arrangements for predictive grades to replace the leaving certificate exams; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6999/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 247, 250, 262, 281, 285, 302, 339 and 404 together.

Calculated Grades are decided based on data on each candidate provided by schools. The calculated grades system will combine estimates of a student's expected performance in a sub-

ject and level, with information about how students in the school have fared in this subject in recent years in line with national performance standards over time. The National standardisation process does not favour any type of student or school.

When the estimated marks from a school are standardised, if a candidate is a particularly strong candidate in a class – irrespective of the school attended – then that student will still emerge as a particularly strong candidate, and the calculated grade will be as close to what would have achieved in the examinations as it is possible to calculate.

Whether or not the marks in any subject from a school move up or down during National standardisation depends on the accuracy with which teachers and schools have made their estimates, not on the kind of school a student is attending. For example, it is possible that the estimated marks in one subject from a school will need to be moved up and the marks in another subject from the same school will need to be moved down.

The most important information about each student is the marks and ranking that the school provides to the Department. National standardisation uses two further sources of information to adjust a school's estimated marks if there is evidence that a school has been too harsh or too lenient in a given subject. The way these two sources of information are used is interconnected.

The first of the two further sources of information for the National standardisation process is the Junior Cycle/Certificate actual marks attained by the Leaving Certificate class of 2020 taking a particular subject in the given school, and the second is about the general pattern of results in the subject from Leaving Certificate classes in that school over a number of years.

This information will all be assembled and will be used to predict the level of achievement that this year's Leaving Certificate group would have been expected to reach in that subject if they had sat the Leaving Certificate examination in the normal way. This means that if a given class is a particularly "strong class", the expected level of achievement of that class would reflect that fact and so the National standardisation process will take full account of it. If the school's estimated marks reflect this properly, then there will not be a need to move them up or down.

Research and statistics allow my Department to understand the extent to which groups of students in a school have results that are similar from one year to the next. These sources also allow my Department to take account of the fact that individuals within those groups can have levels of achievement that can vary quite a lot.

The information about each individual and their peers is combined with the information about the school's previous results and previous groups to allow checks that the marks and rankings for each subject in a school and all other schools are reasonable. This means that all candidates across the country are treated fairly.

Most importantly, I can confirm that the statistical process being applied will not impose any predetermined score on any individual in a class or school.

State Examinations

248. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to ensure that the appeals process for calculated grades for leaving certificate students will be transparent and that details of the way in which the determination is reached is made available to the pupil; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6232/20]

359. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if clarity will be provided regarding the leaving certificate exams appeal process; the date from which students can appeal their exam results; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6725/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 248 and 359 together.

As part of the calculated grades process where a student is not satisfied with their calculated grade it can be appealed to my Department. The appeal system is set out in the information available on my Department's website. The appeals mechanism will ensure that each step in the process leading to the generation of a calculated grade has been followed correctly and that all data has been used and transferred correctly.

The appeals process will not examine the initial estimated mark that was decided by the subject teacher. The teacher is the best placed person to examine the work of the student and give a balanced professional judgement, based on evidence, about the expected achievement of the student.

The appeal process will include a three-stage process involving:

- Stage 1: Checks will be undertaken to ensure that the data was recorded correctly by the school and that it was transferred correctly into the data collection system.

- Stage 2: There will also be a review to ensure that the data was correctly received and processed in the calculated grade model.

- Stage 3: Students unhappy with the outcome of this process can seek a review by Independent Appeal Scrutineers.

If students are unhappy with the outcome of this review, there will be an opportunity to sit the examinations at a later stage when it is safe and practicable to do so.

In addition, the Department will arrange for an independent expert unconnected with the design of the calculated grades model to provide overall validation on the model, including the operation of the appeals system.

School Accommodation Provision

249. **Deputy Darragh O'Brien** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the progress on the extension of a school (details supplied); if it will be ready for the beginning of the academic school year in September 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6233/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department is in receipt of an application, for additional school accommodation, from the school authority in question. The assessment process to determine the school's permanent accommodation needs is nearing completion. The school will be informed of the decision in due course.

In the meantime, interim temporary accommodation has been approved to cater for the schools need in the short term. The school authority has advised that they have accommodation to cater for the start of the next academic year.

Question No. 250 answered with Question No. 247.

Question No. 251 answered with Question No. 159.

School Staff

252. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the case of a person (details supplied) will be addressed. [6249/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am pleased to inform the Deputy that arrangements are being made to have payment issued to the person referred to by the Deputy. The first payment will be issued on the 29th May.

Question No. 253 answered with Question No. 159.

Third Level Education

254. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a series of matters will be clarified regarding the situation in relation to third-level courses, such as social care studies which require students to finish placements of up to 800 hours in a workplace (details supplied). [6266/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Since the onset of the Covid-19 outbreak, significant work has been undertaken by a stakeholder group chaired by the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and including the representative bodies of education providers to address issues relating to the maintenance of the quality and standards of teaching and learning, assessment and qualifications. This group has focused on the implementation of alternative arrangements, where appropriate and necessary, to meet both these standards and, where applicable, the educational accreditation criteria established by Professional Recognition Bodies (PRBs).

In the case of Social Care, the awards standards established by QQI reflect the accreditation criteria that have been set out by CORU, Ireland's multi-profession Health and Social Care Regulator and consequently the relevant PRB for this profession. Engagement is ongoing between members of the stakeholders group, QQI and CORU to ensure that necessary arrangements are put in place to maintain standards of education and training in this area so that students can progress e.g. from third year into fourth year or, where relevant, graduate with the relevant professional competencies that have been set out by CORU and which are reflected in QQI's award standards.

Schools Administration

255. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a school (details supplied) will be designated as a school for children of 5 years of age and over with complex needs in view of the fact a patron from the CDET B has expressed interest and the NCSE has been informed of the matter. [6274/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The provision of education for children with special needs is an ongoing priority for Government.

Currently, almost 20% of the total Education Vote or €1.9bn is invested in supporting children with special needs.

As a result the numbers of special education teachers, special needs assistants and special class and school places are at unprecedented levels.

The majority of children with special educational needs attend mainstream class, where they may access additional supports if required.

But some students may find it difficult to manage full-time placement in mainstream and so placement in a Special Class or Special School setting may be deemed appropriate where placement in mainstream class is not in the best interests of the child.

Special Schools funded by my Department are established as special primary schools and cater for children and young persons with complex special educational needs from the age of 4 years until the end of the school year in which they reach their 18th year.

Provision in our 124 special schools has also increased from 6,848 placements in 2011 to 7,872 this year.

Nationally, 167 new special classes opened this school year, which means there are 1,618 special classes in place, compared to 548 in 2011.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide; has well established structures in place for engaging with schools and parents; and seeks to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all children who have been identified as needing special class placements.

It is open to any school to make an application to the NCSE for the establishment of specialised provision and where sanctioned, a range of supports, including capital funding, is made available to the school. My Department works closely with the NCSE in this regard. In considering these applications, however, the NSCE, in conjunction with the school buildings unit of my Department, will be required to take into account the capacity of a school to establish such a class, including the provision of sufficient accommodation space within the school.

The NCSE is planning a further expansion of special class and special school places nationally to meet identified need for next year. This process is ongoing.

Normally, special class and special school places are established with the full cooperation of the schools in areas where they are required. However there are some parts of the country where the NCSE has faced challenges in getting schools and their patrons to voluntarily agree to provide special class or special school places.

I know that this can cause much anguish for parents and families involved. As Minister I have a power under Section 37A of the Education Act 1998 to direct a school to provide additional provision where all reasonable efforts have failed.

I would prefer to see schools volunteer to provide more places rather than places being secured on the back of an order or a direction from me. It is the right thing for the children in a community.

The legislation was used for the first time in April 2019, in respect of the Dublin 15 area.

Significant progress was made in a relatively short period with the establishment of Danu Special School as well as six schools offering to open special classes.

The experience of Dublin 15 shows that real and practical challenges can be addressed by working together to provide additional special class and special school places.

The legislation was activated for a second time on the 29th October, 2019 following a report by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) which identified 82 children in South Dublin needing special education school places in the current school year and a further potential 68 children needing special education school places in 2020/21.

Since then, as required under the Act, the NCSE in consultation with the relevant education stakeholders, has been testing the capacity among schools in the South Dublin area.

On 21 April 2020 I received a report from the NCSE, pursuant to Section 37A(2) of the Education Act 1998 (as inserted by section 8 of the Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018) in respect of South Dublin, as the NCSE Council remains of the opinion that there is an insufficient number of special class and special school places within the South Dublin area for September 2020.

Before reaching this opinion, the NCSE has undertaken substantial work reviewing provision and accommodation in the 231 mainstream primary and 23 special schools in South Dublin.

Following engagement between NCSE local personnel and school management and Parents, very good progress has been achieved. 78 ASD primary school special class placements and 12 ASD early intervention special class places have been created in 14 schools in South Dublin, with 13 new ASD special classes and 2 new ASD early intervention special classes to open for September 2020.

However, the NCSE has reported that to date, an insufficient number of schools have indicated a willingness to open additional special classes. The NCSE is of the opinion that should this continue, there remains a need for an additional 43 ASD primary special class places and 36 special school places in South Dublin.

The report also outlines the schools that should be requested to make additional provision.

This report will now be considered and if I agree with the position as set out by NCSE, next steps in the process will be considered which may include serving a statutory notice on schools identified if required.

At each stage of the process, schools are given the opportunity to make representations and there is also an option for arbitration.

Statutory notices issued under the Act together with the representations received from the schools are published on the Department's website.

The necessary steps in the Admissions Act process, will continue to be expedited to ensure that every child has a suitable school placement, which is the key objective of my Department.

State Examinations

256. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the leaving certificate results will be issued on the same date as in August 2019; if students applying to colleges abroad will have their results on time to begin their studies in other countries; if consultations have been had with UK authorities in relation to the situation with the leaving certificate and the knock-on effects for students applying through UCAS; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6305/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The announcement of the

postponement of the 2020 Leaving Certificate on May 8th means that all students are to be offered the option of receiving Calculated Grades for the subjects they are studying and the alternative of sitting the 2020 Leaving Certificate examinations at a date in the future when it is considered safe to hold the examinations.

It is my intention that results will be available as close as possible to the intended date on which the Leaving Cert examination results were originally due.

I am very conscious of the thousands of students who have applied to study in Northern Ireland, Britain, Europe and elsewhere. I have personally spoken with relevant Ministers in the UK. Contacts with the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland continue, as well as contacts with officials in the other devolved Governments in the UK. Departmental officials are engaging directly with UCAS to work through the key issues. I have also written to my counterparts across the European Union to explain the decision regarding the Leaving Certificate and to ask for as much flexibility as possible for students coming from Ireland to study in other Member States.

Question No. 257 answered with Question No. 159.

State Examinations

258. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if teachers are to be indemnified against legal action as a consequence of the new calculated grades system. [6327/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Comprehensive guidance to teachers deputy principals and principals regarding the calculated grades system, including the issue of indemnity, is currently being developed and will be issued by my Department shortly.

Question No. 259 answered with Question No. 201.

Third Level Admissions

260. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which CAO reapplicants will be catered for in 2020 (details supplied); and if no student will be disadvantaged in these circumstances. [6329/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): On Friday 8th May I announced the decision to postpone the Leaving Certificate and offer students calculated grades, which can be used as a basis for entry into tertiary education. This decision was made following the assessment of public health advice, and was made in the best interests of students and all those involved in running the state exams.

The system whereby calculated grades are generated includes a process of national standardisation in which marks and rankings submitted by schools will be examined and may be adjusted using statistical methods to ensure a common national standard is applied. Profiles of achievement at Leaving Certificate level over the last three years will be used as part of this process and this will help ensure that the grades issued remain in line with national performance standards over time.

However CAO points naturally fluctuate from year to year because of the volume of applications, the number of applicants who meet the entry requirement, the performance of ap-

plicants, and the number of places on offer. It is not possible to predict whether points will go up or down in any year, due to these variable elements.

Question No. 261 answered with Question No. 201.

Question No. 262 answered with Question No. 247.

Health Professions Admission Test

263. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when the HPAT results will be available. [6332/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The HPAT is independently administered by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) on behalf of the universities' medical schools and the RCSI. The selection criteria and process for admission to medical schools is a matter for those institutions in line with their statutory autonomy in relation to academic affairs. Neither I nor my Department has a function in the administration of the HPAT, including the issuing of results.

National Council for Special Education

264. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a report will be presented to the principal and board of management of a school (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6335/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The purpose of the site visit on the 12th August 2019 was to offer technical advice on the suitability of the school and site to incorporate SEN teaching in the immediate and long term, with the support of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and as a detailed inspection of all structures on the site was not carried out a written report was not prepared.

At the meeting the school authority was advised to submit an application for additional accommodation under my Department’s Additional Accommodation Scheme and this application is currently being assessed to determine the school long-term accommodation needs. As soon as this assessment is completed the school authority will be informed and details of the new accommodation to be provided will be forwarded to the school authority for their consideration and approval.

State Examinations

265. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when the leaving certificate 2020 results will be available. [6340/20]

389. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the timeline for students that are not content with their leaving certificate results sitting individual or multiple exams, receiving their results, receiving a college place and entering college in 2020/2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6909/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 265 and 389 together.

20 May 2020

The Leaving Certificate results based on calculated grades will be provided to candidates as close as possible to the normal results day.

Students unhappy with the calculated grade they receive will have access to an appeals process. Work is ongoing with the higher education sector to integrate the timing of the first stage of the appeals process with the start date for college entry.

Students who receive an upgraded CAO place following Stage 1 of the appeals process may be able to take up their place in the 2020/2021 academic year.

The timeframe for sitting the postponed Leaving Certificate 2020 examinations cannot be determined at this time pending public health advice that would identify a safe period of time to do so and the numbers of candidates in each subject has been identified. It is not expected that students who seek to rely on the results of the postponed examinations will be able to commence a third level place in the 2020/2021 academic year.

Third Level Admissions

266. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the CAO revised deadline for the leaving certificate 2020. [6341/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Higher education institutions are autonomous with regard to management of their academic affairs including admissions procedures. The CAO process applications on behalf of the HEIs.

As such, neither I nor my Department have any role in relation to the operation of the CAO. A timetable of key dates can be found on the CAO website www.cao.ie and queries on these dates should be sent directly to the CAO.

In relation to the issuing of CAO offers this year, this will be dependent on the issuing of calculated grades. The plan is that calculated grades will be provided to candidates as close as possible to the normal results day, and therefore CAO results dates will also adhere as closely as possible to the normal timeframes. Applicants will be notified as soon as a revised schedule has been agreed.

Third Level Education

267. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the date for the re-opening of third-level institutions. [6342/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Higher Education Institutions are autonomous institutions and are entitled to regulate their own academic affairs and administrative processes. Therefore the timelines for re-opening are a matter for each institution to decide.

The national co-ordination group for tertiary education is meeting on a regular basis to consider key issues impacting the tertiary sector, including arrangements for re-opening institutions. These arrangements will be dependent on public health advice, and will be communicated to learners as soon as possible.

Question No. 268 answered with Question No. 159.

National Training Fund

269. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the expenditure under the national training fund between funding allocated to those in employment and funding for those unemployed on an annual basis in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; the percentage breakdown of the funding between training for those in employment and those unemployed; the number of participants under the programme annually according to this same breakdown; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6347/20]

270. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the amount collected from the national training levy in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; the use made of this funding by types of course or programme, apprenticeship, traineeship, further education, third-level, research and so on; the purpose of the fund; the evolution of its use over the past number of years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6348/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan):
I propose to take Questions Nos. 269 and 270 together.

The National Training Fund (NTF) Act, 2000 provides for a levy on employers to be used to fund the development of and raising of skills amongst those in, or seeking, employment.

Funding from the National Training Fund (NTF) is allocated by my Department with the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, in accordance with the provisions of the National Training Fund Act, 2000.

Following a consultation process, the Government, as part of Budget 2018, decided to raise the rate of the National Training Fund (NTF) levy by 0.1% in 2018 to 0.8% and by a further 0.1% in both 2019 and 2020. The increase to the levy was accompanied by a programme of reforms in how the NTF is managed, evaluated and reported on.

An independent review of the National Training Fund was commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills as part of the package of reforms and this review was published by the Minister for Education and Skills on 17 August 2018. The report made 14 specific recommendations across 4 key areas:

- Reform of the future direction of the NTF.
- Utilising the NTF to support investment in Higher Education.
- Enhancing enterprise engagement and input to NTF priorities.
- Improvements in monitoring/evaluation of the NTF

An Implementation Plan to deliver these recommendations was published alongside the announcement of Budget 2019 along with details of a new NTF advisory group. This advisory group is a permanent resourced structure to optimise enterprise engagement on NTF priorities. The membership of the group consists of key stakeholders from the enterprise sector, Department officials, and bodies who have a strategic and oversight role in delivery of skills provision. The Group has met on three occasions in 2019 and have informed the priorities and direction of funding from the NTF for Budget 2020.

In recent years, there has been a need to change and rebalance the suite of funded programmes to reflect the changing labour market conditions and areas of skills needs. Programmes are now more focused on labour market skill needs across higher education, further education and training and other partners. The NTF Advisory Group has been considering the implica-

tions for the Fund in light of the transformed economic and labour market landscape arising from COVID-19 and have fed into the overall skills policy as part of the immediate response to the current crisis and also the future world of work.

Amount Collected from the NTF Levy 2018 – April 2020

The NTF levy is collected by the Revenue Commissioners as part of the PRSI collection system. The funds collected is included in the transfer of gross PRSI from the Revenue Commissioners to the Social Insurance Fund of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP). Each year DEASP undertakes an apportionment exercise to analyse PRSI collection data and to apportion funds to the Social Insurance Fund; the Health Levy and the National Training Fund.

At the end of April 2020, the National Training Fund had received €261m in respect of NTF levy receipts. This would represent the contributions from employers in respect of the four months from December 2019 to March 2020. The following table shows the income generated by the levy from 2018 to 2020. In the 2020 Revised Estimates for the Public Service, the levy is profiled to collect €823m, although this estimate was made before the current COVID-19 crisis. NTF income is now likely to be significantly reduced given the economic impact of COVID-19. Early estimates project that the reduction in income will be over 20%.

NTF Levy	2018	2019	2020
	€000	€000	€000
	553,756	712,000	823,000

I also include tables which outline the additional information requested by the Deputy:

Table 1: NTF provision funding by types of course of programme

Table 2: Breakdown of participation by NTF programme

Table 3: The percentage breakdown of the funding between training for those in employment and those unemployed

Table 4: The number of participants under the programme annually by NTF Programme

Additional information on the programmes supported by the Fund can be found at the following link:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/national-training-fund-expenditure-report-2019.pdf>

[National Training Fund]

Schools Building Projects Status

271. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the report of delays in the delivery of a school (details supplied) due to Covid-19; when works will resume; the new completion date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6360/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The ‘Roadmap for the Reopening of Society and Business’ published by Government includes certain construction operations for inclusion in the first phase of economic activity which came into effect on May 18th 2020.

Subject to compliance with the 'Return to Work Safely Protocol', contractors may commence operations on site. The contractor must determine it is safe to commence working and be satisfied that it is in a position to meet the requirements of the Protocol and its contractual obligations.

Apart from the actual site shutdown of recent weeks, the impact on the construction programme of the project to which the deputy refers will only become more clear as the contractor recommences construction activity on site and adjusts to operating in the new environment.

Schools Building Projects Status

272. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of a new school building for a school (details supplied); if the site for the new school building has been secured; if not, the stage it is at; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6362/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): As the Deputy is aware, a site has been identified to accommodate a permanent school building for the school to which she refers. My Department is working closely with officials from Monaghan County Council under the Memorandum of Understanding in relation to the acquisition of the site. As the site acquisition process is complex, it is not possible to give a definitive timeframe for the completion of the acquisition.

My officials will continue to progress the acquisition of this site so that the architectural planning process for the provision of a new permanent building for the school in question can commence.

Third Level Education

273. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if there are provisions in place for leaving certificate students that had been approved or would have expected approval for third-level scholarships for the upcoming term that now look likely to be postponing this step up in education. [6363/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): A student who may be awarded my Department's Third Level Bursary in the 2020/21 academic year may defer their bursary to the 2021/22 academic year.

Question No. 274 answered with Question No. 159.

Third Level Admissions

275. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to assist students on post-leaving certificate courses that have exams coming up to get into third-level education; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6371/20]

406. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the measures being put forward to protect post leaving certificate students similar to the leaving certificate in view of the fact students have had their learning significantly interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic; and if it will be recommended to higher level institutions that these places be dedicated to students coming from post-leaving certificate routes in view of the expected decrease in interna-

tional students. [7005/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 275 and 406 together.

Education and Training Boards (ETBs) have an agreed position on determining and implementing reasonable alternative methods of assessment for their learners, while ensuring that learning outcomes can continue to be assessed and approved by academic governance. Each ETB has developed more detailed contingency plans at provider level, submitted to Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and published on each ETB's website. These alternative methods are currently being applied across ETB provision, including post-leaving certificate courses.

ETBs have participated fully in structures established with the higher and further education sectors to manage the response to Covid-19. All agencies, awarding bodies and other relevant stakeholders continue to work closely to ensure that ETB learners currently undertaking, or due to undertake, assessments, or completing 2020 academic calendar courses for the purpose of progression to higher education will be facilitated to do so.

Apprenticeship Programmes

276. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to assist apprentices that have had exams cancelled and need to pass those exams to graduate to the next phase of their training; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6372/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan): SOLAS is actively engaged with the education and training providers to put in place alternative learning and assessment solutions for apprentices which safeguard learner safety in the current climate as well as maintaining the quality and integrity of the apprenticeship programme.

It is intended that the majority of craft apprentices who were close to completing an off-the-job phase of training in March 2020 will be offered an opportunity to complete outstanding theory assessments before the end of June. An initial communication on this matter issued to relevant craft apprentices and employers on the 15th May, 2020 with a follow-up text on the 18th May. Further information will issue in the near future.

SOLAS provides ongoing updates for apprentices and employers in relation to the impact of Covid-19 on apprenticeship programmes. These may be found at www.apprenticeship.ie and also on Twitter @apprenticesirl.

School Staff

277. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated cost of permitting schools with enrolments of 520 to 700 to fill secretary vacancies providing they have fewer than two posts and schools with enrolments of 650 to 750 providing that they have fewer than three posts. [6380/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Department provides funding for Secretary posts in the Community, Comprehensive and Education and Training Board Sectors.

A recruitment moratorium was introduced in the Public Service in 2009 which applied to these posts.

At that time alleviation measures were put in place which permitted schools to fill Clerical Officer vacancies so as to maintain staffing levels at a maximum of 1 Clerical Officer per school.

I acknowledged the administrative burden on schools particularly for larger schools and introduced further alleviation measures in 2019 for those with enrolments of 700 and more to allow them employ an additional Clerical Officer up to a maximum of 2.

Funding has been provided as part of Budget 2020 to continue these alleviation measures for the 2020/21 school year.

This funding provides for the further relaxation of the moratorium in the case of Clerical Officers and will permit schools with enrolments of 500 - 625 to fill Clerical Officer vacancies provided they have less than 1.5 and those with enrolments of 626 – 699 to fill Clerical Officer vacancies provided they have less than 2.

In addition to the above improvements the estimated full year cost of permitting ETB, Community & Comprehensive schools with an enrolment of 520-700 to fill Secretary vacancies provided they have less than 2 would be €0.9m and for those with an enrolment of 650 to 750 to fill Secretary vacancies provided they have less than 3 would be €0.96m.

School Services Staff

278. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated cost of permitting schools with enrolments of 725 or more to fill caretaker vacancies providing they have fewer than three caretakers. [6381/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department provides funding for Clerical Officer & Caretaker posts in the Community, Comprehensive and Education and Training Board Sectors.

A recruitment moratorium was introduced in the Public Service in 2009 which applied to these posts.

At that time alleviation measures were put in place which permitted schools to fill Clerical Officer & Caretaker vacancies so as to maintain staffing levels at a maximum of 1 Clerical Officer and 1 Caretaker per school.

I acknowledged the administrative burden on schools particularly for larger schools and introduced further alleviation measures in 2019 for those with enrolments of 700 and more to allow them employ an additional Clerical Officer up to a maximum of 2.

Funding has been provided as part of Budget 2020 which provides for the extension of the alleviation measures introduced in 2019 for Clerical Officers to Caretakers by enabling schools in the C&C and ETB Sectors with enrolments of 700 or more, to fill Caretaker vacancies provided they have less than 2 Caretakers.

In addition to the above the estimated full year cost of permitting ETB, Community & Comprehensive schools with enrolments of 725 or more to fill caretaker vacancies providing they have fewer than three caretakers would be €3m.

Questions Nos. 279 to 282, inclusive, answered with Question No. 201.

State Examinations

283. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the criteria that will be used to decide whether or not to sit the leaving certificate in the coming months; the circumstances in which he will be satisfied that it is safe to run this; and his plans to ensure that some notice is given to allow for study. [6400/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Any decision to run the 2020 Leaving Certificate examinations at a date in the future will be guided by public health advice at that time. My Department will engage with relevant stakeholders to assist with the development of plans for the running of the examinations in an environment that may require social distancing and other measures. The safety of students and staff will be the most important consideration.

Question No. 284 answered with Question No. 159.

Question No. 285 answered with Question No. 247.

Third Level Admissions

286. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the steps he is now taking to ensure that students that have received a conditional offer of a place at a university in Britain or Northern Ireland through the UCAS system will not lose that place and that offers will still stand; and the way in which he plans to achieve this outcome. [6403/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am very conscious of the thousands of students taking the Leaving Certificate who have applied to study in Northern Ireland, Britain, Europe and elsewhere.

On 8th May I announced that the Leaving Certificate was to be postponed and that students would be issued with calculated grades, which would form the basis for entry to third level. While timelines for the issuing of these grades are still being worked through, the plan is that calculated grades will be provided to candidates as close as possible to the normal results day, which will facilitate timely entry into third level courses both in Ireland and in other countries. The date for the release of grades will be communicated to students as soon as it has been finalised.

I have spoken directly to the Secretary of State for Education in the UK Gavin Williamson MP to discuss this matter and I have written to both Ministers in Northern Ireland with responsibility for Education to highlight this issue.

Last Monday, 18th May, I participated in a video conference with my fellow EU Ministers for Education on the impact of Covid 19 throughout all Members States' education systems. These discussions were well aligned with the engagements I have had with the UK - namely, the reopening of education and training settings, and encouraging flexibility in the higher education system in terms of registration and admission of school leavers and possible delays in the publication of their school terminal examinations results. I was encouraged that all Ministers emphasised the need for flexibility and were advocating for solutions to be found that are in the best interests of our students.

Question No. 287 answered with Question No. 201.

State Examinations

288. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to the situation facing persons that are seeking to become teachers and further to this have repeated subjects such as, for example, Irish, having completed the remainder of the leaving certificate in another year; and if the calculation of their grade will be considered acceptable to admit students to teacher training courses in such circumstances. [6405/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): On 8th of May, 2020, I announced the postponement of the 2020 Leaving Certificate examinations until a later time when it is safe to run the examinations. This decision was taken by Cabinet based on public health advice as the welfare of students and that of their families is front and central to all decision making.

Leaving Certificate candidates can now opt to have calculated grades issued to them in order to facilitate their progress to third-level education in 2020. The plan is to provide calculated grades to candidates as close as possible to the normal results day.

All candidates will also have an opportunity to sit the Leaving Certificate Examination at the earliest, safest and practical time to do so. The State Examinations Commission will set about putting the detailed arrangements for these examinations in place, guided of course by health advice.

I am aware that there are candidates who are repeating a Leaving Certificate subject/s in order to satisfy a minimum entry requirement for entry to a 3rd level programme of initial teacher education. For those candidates who are studying one or more subjects outside of a recognised school, my Department will be flexible in accepting estimated marks and rankings from other schools or colleges, and will look at this issue on a case-by-case basis.

In general, I can say that, provided that my Department can receive an estimated mark and ranking from a teacher in a way that is fair to all candidates, my Department will seek to provide a calculated grade. This calculated grade can then be used in the same way as a Leaving Certificate grade to satisfy minimum entry requirements for entry to an initial teacher education programme. My Department will continue to keep the matter under review.

Covid-19 Pandemic

289. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the situation that applies to students that are not classed as independent and whose parents are currently temporarily unemployed due to Covid-19 related circumstances but do not know if they will be taken on again such as, for example, in the bar or retail trade; and if persons in these circumstances will qualify for the change of circumstances clause. [6406/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Student grant applications for academic year 2020/21 will be assessed based on income earned in 2019.

However, if a student or party to their application experiences a change in circumstances that is not a temporary change and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future they can apply to have their application assessed under the change in circumstances provision.

In the case of a change of circumstances all household income, and not just the income of the person experiencing the change, will be assessed/reassessed on the basis of the current year (2020). The change of circumstance is not applied retrospectively. Therefore, if the change occurs during the academic year, any award or adjustment will take effect from the month in which the change occurred. This provision may benefit some students whose income has fallen

in 2020 due to Covid-19 issues.

The decision on eligibility for a student grant is a matter for the centralised student grant awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) to determine. Should a student wish to discuss their particular circumstances with SUSI, the Support Desk may be contacted by telephone 0761 087 874 or email: support@susi.ie

Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, students in third-level institutions experiencing exceptional financial need can apply for support under the Student Assistance Fund. This Fund assists full-time and part-time students, in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Details of this fund are available from the Access Office in the third level institution attended. Institutions have the autonomy to maximise the flexibility in the Student Assistance Fund to enable HEIs to support students during the COVID-19 situation.

In addition, tax relief at the standard rate of tax may be claimed in respect of tuition fees paid for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education. Further information on this tax relief is available from students' local Tax Offices or from the Revenue Commissioners website, www.revenue.ie

Third Level Admissions

290. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he is taking steps to ameliorate the stress facing leaving certificate students by seeking to expand the number of places at third-level in view of the shortfall in international students seeking to attend. [6407/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): We understand that this is a time of uncertainty for students hoping to progress to third level and work is ongoing in ensuring that the third level entry process can progress as smoothly and equitably as possible. The National Co-ordination group for tertiary education is meeting on a regular basis, and is closely monitoring the impact that Covid-19 is having on third level institutions and their current and prospective students.

In light of the current public health circumstances, it is difficult to predict the expected international student numbers for next academic year. Much depends on unfolding events such as all available national and international public health advice, particularly in respect of international travel for programmes where a physical presence in Ireland is needed.

Higher education institutions are autonomous with regard to management of their academic affairs including admissions procedures. The CAO processes applications for undergraduate, and some postgraduate, courses on behalf of the HEIs. Decisions on admissions are made by the HEIs which then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates. This remains the case this year, including in the case of any drop in domestic or international enrolments.

Third Level Institutions

291. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to the paper produced by an association (details supplied) regarding the severe financial position facing universities and other third-level institutions; and his views on whether dedicated sustainability and growth funding is needed for the sector. [6408/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I have received the paper referred to by the Deputy and I will respond directly to the association in relation to the issues raised.

Significant work has been undertaken by a stakeholder group chaired by the Higher Education Authority and including the representative bodies for the universities (IUA) and the institutes of technology (THEA) to collect information on the increased costs and projected income losses advised by HEIs arising from the crisis based on an agreed set of assumptions. The HEA are co-ordinating the impact on financial and operational landscape for each HEI to establish if the viability of institutes is at risk. This report will be submitted to DES for consideration. Additionally a group chaired by the Department of Education and Skills has also been established with the key stakeholders to examine the impact of and plan responses to the projected impact of Covid19 on international students numbers.

The projected financial impact of Covid19 on Higher Education and the Tertiary Education system as a whole is being assessed by the Department of Education and Skills as part of its ongoing analysis of the impact of Covid19 on the education sector overall. The provision of additional financial support to support Tertiary Education to ensure that it can contribute fully to economic recovery and to meeting priority skill needs will be examined in the context of overall expenditure management and budgetary policy. The Department will continue to engage with key stakeholders to safeguard the recovery of the tertiary education sector.

My Department held a recent meeting with DPER to discuss the potential impact of COVID on the Tertiary Education Sector. The Higher Education sector is a key element of the economy's economic and social infrastructure which also has a crucial role in recovery in supporting economic and social recovery. The priority is to seek to safeguard that capacity against the backdrop of the broader economic crisis by ensuring that core provision is maintained and in particular by assessing the level of financial vulnerability that may threaten the viability of any specific HEI. This aligns with the key principle of Government's approach to Covid-19 which is to seek to support financially stressed entities reflecting Covid impacts across all sectors of the economy where viability is at risk. Insofar as higher education research is concerned, the Department will continue to engage with DBEI and key funding agencies to respond to specific queries.

In addition, a review is currently underway under the European Commission DG Reform's Structural Reform Support Programme on Increasing the Future Sustainability of Higher and Further Education Provision in Ireland. The review encompasses the review of the funding options for higher education included in the 2016 (Cassells) Report of the Expert Group on Future Funding of Higher Education. The study is scheduled to be substantially complete in Q4 2020.

Question No. 292 answered with Question No. 149.

Covid-19 Pandemic

293. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to the impact that recent events have had on fifth year students; and the steps being taken to support them. [6410/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Since the announcement in March that schools would close and the subsequent extensions of that closure, I and my Department have made it clear that teachers and other staff in the education sector would continue to work and to engage with their students. My Department has written to school management and

asked schools to put in place arrangements to continue the delivery of education to students. A series of guidance notes to support schools in how to effectively support and engage with their students continues to be compiled to address challenges in providing programmes of continued learning in the current context.

School and college buildings since May 18th are available for access by teachers to facilitate the organisation and distribution of remote learning.

Specific guidance on the continuity of schooling for primary and post-primary schools issued on Thursday 2nd April. Further guidance issued on 22nd April, with a particular focus on supporting students with special educational needs and students at risk of educational disadvantage. These guidance documents are available on my Department's website.

The guidance is informed by feedback from school surveys and prompted by a growing demand in some schools seeking such guidance. The reaction from schools is that this material is particularly useful as they navigate the challenges associated with the new teaching and learning environment that has emerged through enforced closures of schools during the public health crises.

The nature of distant learning has required schools to take on a range of approaches to support their students. Schools and teachers have demonstrate great innovation in adapting to the new situation. Many schools are using digital resources and remote teaching as well as communicating with parents through email and digital apps to provide work for students. The Department is aware that many schools are using e-platforms to enable their teachers to provide work to students, particularly to students in examination classes, and to enable students to complete tasks and tests for assessment.

Resources to support the transition to distant learning are being provided by the Department support service, the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST),. Scoilnet the Department's educational portal provides access to a wide variety of resources and information developed by various services including: the PDST, Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), the National Council for Special Education. These resources can all be accessed at <https://www.scoilnet.ie/support/>. Scoilnet also provides access to extensive educational resources including Worldbook Online, at www.scoilnet.ie

As part of the implementation of the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 Enhancing Teaching Learning and Assessment, funding of €210m for ICT Infrastructure will be distributed to schools over the five years of the Strategy. €110m has issued over the lifetime of the strategy to date. €50m is issuing now in the form of a grant payment to all eligible schools.

In the context of the current public health crisis the funding can be focussed on assisting schools to address ICT needs to support the provision of remote learning. This can include the purchase of ICT devices that can be shared with students who do not have access to devices, essential learning platforms and other ICT infrastructure to support the provision of remote learning.

The Department will continue to work with the education partners to provide solutions in areas where digital and remote learning options may not be possible.

In the context of planning for a return to school which is underway, I expect those going into sixth year in post primary schools to be a group that will receive a particular focus in the context of preparations for the Leaving Certificate examinations in 2021.

Third Level Admissions

294. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will seek to expand places on the HEAR and DARE schemes in view of the impact of recent events to ensure that the impact on students that suffer from disadvantage is minimised. [6411/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The HEAR and DARE schemes are operated by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and regulated by the higher education institutions themselves. As such, the Department of Education and Skills has no role in the policy criteria of the scheme.

Admissions under the HEAR and DARE scheme are regulated by the higher education institutions themselves. Each institution determines its own admissions policy in relation to the schemes, the number of places they reserve and the allocation of those places.

Applications to both schemes are submitted to the Central Applications Office (CAO) who coordinate the scheme for participating institutions. All enquiries should be directed to the CAO, www.cao.ie

Student Universal Support Ireland

295. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will seek to expand accessibility to SUSI and increase the amount and reduce income thresholds in view of the impact of recent events to ensure that the impact on students that suffer from disadvantage is minimised. [6412/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am conscious of the difficulties being experienced by students and their families as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and of the importance of the Student Grant Scheme and related supports, such as the Student Assistance Fund and the Fund for Students with Disabilities. These supports have a fundamental role in assisting families who are putting their children through further and higher education.

Accordingly, the following arrangements have been put in place:

Student grant payments for academic year 2019/20 will continue as normal. The duration and value of the grant will not change.

Student grant applications for academic year 2020/21 will be assessed based on income earned in 2019.

If a student or party to their application experiences a change in circumstances that is not a temporary change and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, they can apply to have their application assessed under the change in circumstances provision of the relevant Student Grant Scheme. Following such a review, the applicant may fall within the thresholds to become eligible for grant assistance or be entitled to an increased rate of grant or the special rate of grant.

The Student Grant Scheme provides for different levels of income thresholds where families have (i) less than 4 dependent children (ii) between 4 and 7 dependent children and (iii) 8 or more dependent children. In recognition of the additional cost to families where more than one person is attending college, income thresholds may also be increased by up to €4,830 for each additional family member attending college at the same time. In this way, the Student Grant

Scheme is responsive to the individual circumstances of particular families.

The income threshold for the special rate of grant has been increased from €24,000 to €24,500 for the 2020 scheme, so as to ensure that students from families dependent on welfare will continue to be eligible for the special rate of grant. (This reflects the Budget 2019 increase to the maximum point of the weekly State Contributory Pension, plus maximum Qualified Adult Allowance for a person over 66 years).

The Student Assistance Fund (SAF) provides financial assistance to students experiencing financial difficulties while attending third level. Students can be assisted towards the rent, child-care costs, transport costs and books/class materials. The total allocation for the SAF is €9.1 million which includes an additional €1m added to the Fund in 2017 for part-time students who are lone-parents or members of the other access target groups. Prior to that the fund supported full-time students only.

In December 2018 a further €1 million was added to the Fund for students attending Professional Masters of Education courses, who are experiencing financial difficulty. This funding continued into 2019 and 2020. Institutions have the autonomy to maximise the flexibility in the Student Assistance Fund to enable HEIs to support students during the COVID-19 situation.

The Deputy will appreciate that the funding allocation for the student grant scheme and the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) is determined in the context of the overall estimates and budgetary process undertaken by all Government Departments. However, all proposals made in relation to education expenditure will be considered in the context of Budget 2021, having regard to overall resource constraints and other competing demands in the education sector.

In addition, tax relief at the standard rate of tax may be claimed in respect of tuition fees paid for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education. Further information on this tax relief is available from a student's local Tax Office or from the Revenue Commissioners website, www.revenue.ie

Education Policy

296. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to support children that are finishing primary school during transition to secondary school at this time. [6413/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is working on supporting schools to help learners as they transition from primary to post primary education.

Guidance has already issued to schools to help ensure the continuity of teaching and learning, to support those with Special Educational Needs, those in areas of educational disadvantage, and to help support the wellbeing of all learners. Guidance will issue shortly which will include information to support learners at each of the key stages of transition. The aim of the distant learning approaches set out in this guidance is to ensure that children stay connected with learning to facilitate progression to the next level of their education.

School communities have been learning to adjust and adapt to the challenges they face at this time and have taken up the challenge of staying connected with their students for teaching, learning and maintaining the social connections and supports that are so important for young people's wellbeing.

I am aware that transitions across all areas of schooling are a key concern for educators,

parents and pupils, and that the end of school reporting is more important than ever for the transition between primary and post primary school.

Circular 26/2011 requires at the end of the school year that schools report on four areas:

- the child as a learner
- the child's personal and social development
- the child's progress with learning in curriculum areas or subjects
- next steps in the child's learning, including ways for parents to help

The NCCA Education Passport was developed to ensure a smoother transition for learners between primary and post primary schools. Since 2014/15, schools are required to use the NCCA Education Passport materials (available at www.ncca.ie/transfer) to support the reporting and transfer of pupil information at the end of sixth class. Primary schools should ensure that an Education Passport for each pupil is completed and sent to the relevant post primary school following confirmation of enrolment and, ideally, by the end of June.

In addition, the National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS) in my Department has recently issued guidance for Primary Schools in relation to 6th class pupils who are due to transition this year. We know that for these for pupils the typical ceremonies, rites of passage, milestones, and social interactions have all been affected. The guidance for schools, outlines what can be done to support pupils at this time of transition. The guidance recognises that some pupils may need more preparation in advance of the transition, for example, pupils with Special Educational Needs; pupils whose families have been recently bereaved and pupils from vulnerable families. Schools are encouraged to ensure an effective two-way communication system is in place for parent/guardians so that they can clarify any queries they may have. Schools are advised that it is essential to communicate with the receiving post primary school.

In addition to the guidance, NEPS psychologists continue to be available to provide advice and support to school principals, teachers and school communities. NEPS is proactively exploring a number of innovative ways to continue to provide educational psychological services to school communities at this time.

My department is continuing to review and monitor the situation in accordance with the advice from public health authorities and will continue to issue advice and guidance to schools as appropriate.

Question No. 297 answered with Question No. 228.

Question No. 298 answered with Question No. 159.

Question No. 299 answered with Question No. 201.

Third Level Examinations

300. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the discussions he has had regarding end of year examination for those in third-level courses particularly those due to complete their courses in 2020. [6449/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Higher education institutions are autonomous bodies and as such are academically independent and are entitled to

regulate their own academic affairs and administrative processes. Therefore responsibility for examinations and assessments rests ultimately with each individual institution.

The national co-ordination group for tertiary education, which includes representatives from my Department and third level institutions, is meeting regularly to discuss key issues in the tertiary sector including issues around examinations and assessments.

The challenging circumstances that students are facing are being taken into account in the design and marking of revised assessments. Institutions will be ensuring that students suffer no academic disadvantage, with flexible arrangements in relation to exam formats, marking and re-sits. At the same time, HEIs are ensuring that the assessment methods being used will satisfy the requirements of professional/accrediting bodies and external examiners, so that the integrity of the assessment process will not be compromised, thus maintaining confidence and transparency in the quality of the qualification.

Special Educational Needs

301. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position in relation to the July provision in respect of a child (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6453/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am committed to running a summer Provision type programme for children with complex needs this year as soon as it is safe to do so and in accordance with public health advice.

My Department is exploring a number of options for a summer education programme for children with complex special needs.

The primary aim of the proposed programme would be to limit potential regression in learning thereby ensuring in so far as possible that these children can reintegrate and transition into their planned education setting for next year with their peers.

This may be done through a targeted level of supports to address regression of social skills and re-establish tolerance of routines paving the way for reintegrating full time into education when schools reopen in the autumn.

Question No. 302 answered with Question No. 247.

Question No. 303 answered with Question No. 225.

Question No. 304 answered with Question No. 159.

Third Level Admissions

305. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position regarding steps being taken to ensure students applying for third-level through the CAO with leaving certificate results from different years are not advantaged or disadvantaged compared to students with predictive results from 2020. [6482/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): On Friday 8th May I announced the decision to postpone the Leaving Certificate and offer students calculated grades, which can be used as a basis for entry into tertiary education. This decision was made following

the assessment of public health advice, and was made in the best interests of students and all those involved in running the state exams.

The system whereby calculated grades are generated includes a process of national standardisation in which marks and rankings submitted by schools will be examined and may be adjusted using statistical methods to ensure a common national standard is applied. Profiles of achievement at Leaving Certificate level over the last three years will be used as part of this process and this will help ensure that the grades issued remain in line with national performance standards over time.

Student Accommodation

306. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he discussed the situation of on-campus accommodation and the rental status of students in on-campus accommodation with college authorities (details supplied); the further discussions he has had with college authorities regarding the refunding of moneys paid for on-campus accommodation which subsequently could not be accessed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6484/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Before the announcement of closures on March 12, my Department had been in regular contact with its partners in the tertiary education sector in the context of Covid-19.

Immediately following the Taoiseach's announcement of closures on March 12, the communications section issued a detailed statement to all stakeholders in the tertiary sector informing them of the decision to close schools, pre-schools and further and higher education settings. This statement was widely circulated through our social media channels, email and website and the Department was available to assist our partners with any outstanding issues of concern.

Subsequent to this, the Department has been in regular contact with its stakeholders and partners in the tertiary education sector to address the challenges faced by students in this difficult time.

The Department understands based on the information available to it that the majority of students in university-owned accommodation will receive pro-rata refunds if they vacate their accommodation. I have indicated that I would wish to see this principle applied in the case of all students who have vacated their student accommodation however it is not within the remit of my Department to direct any accommodation provider to offer a refund.

Where students are receiving a refund from their accommodation provider they should contact the provider directly for details on how this refund will be facilitated.

Third Level Admissions

307. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the details of the consultation he and his Department have undertaken with the CAO since the announcement to cancel the leaving certificate. [6497/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department has been engaging on an ongoing basis with stakeholders from the tertiary education system, including the CAO, regarding the implications of the changes to the Leaving Certificate on entry to tertiary education. I am conscious of the desire for clarity with regard to CAO timelines and this

is being worked through with our stakeholders. I understand further information on this will be published as soon as details are finalised.

The Deputy should note that Higher Education institutions (HEIs) are autonomous with regard to management of their academic affairs including admissions procedures. The CAO process applications for undergraduate, and some postgraduate, courses on behalf of the HEIs. Decisions on admissions are made by the HEIs who then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates. As such, neither I as Minister nor my Department have any role in relation to the operation of the CAO.

Youthreach Programme

308. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if consideration will be given to allow Youthreach students receive predictive grades for QQI Levels 3 and 4 in view of his recent announcements. [6498/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Education and Training Boards (ETBs) have agreed a framework for determining and implementing reasonable alternative methods of assessment for their learners, while ensuring that learning outcomes can continue to be assessed and approved by academic governance. Each ETB has developed more detailed contingency plans at provider level, submitted to Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and published on each ETB's website. These alternative methods are currently being applied across ETB provision, including for Youthreach learners taking part in QQI levels 3 and 4 programmes. These alternative methods do not include the provision of predicted or calculated grades.

ETBs have participated fully in structures established with the higher and further education sectors to manage the response to Covid-19. All agencies, awarding bodies and other relevant stakeholders continue to work closely to ensure that ETB learners currently undertaking, or due to undertake, assessments, or completing 2020 academic calendar courses for the purpose of progression within further education and training, or to higher education or the world of work, will be facilitated to do so.

Third Level Admissions

309. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the Teaching Council is requiring the completion of a two week Gaeltacht placement for certain cohorts of students before their qualifications from a college (details supplied) will be recognised in 2021 while for others that started six months before the requirement has been waived; the reason for this divergence and inequality of treatment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6500/20]

376. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will address a matter regarding a college course (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6832/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 309 and 376 together.

As you may be aware, my Department and the Teaching Council issued a joint statement on 23 March 2020 advising that in light of the emergency measures being adopted in relation to

Covid-19, students who are in the final year of their Initial Teacher Education programme will not be required to complete the usual Gaeltacht Learning Period in order to graduate in summer 2020.

In the case of student teachers in all other years of their ITE programme, the Gaeltacht requirement is being postponed, to be fulfilled at a later point in the programme.

Completion of the Gaeltacht placement is an important element of programmes of initial teacher education for primary teachers and therefore a requirement for registration with the Teaching Council.

School Staff

310. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to ensure the current level of teaching staff is maintained at a school (details supplied). [6502/20]

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

The staffing schedule operates in a clear and transparent manner and treats all similar types of schools equally irrespective of location. The staffing schedule includes an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal under certain criteria to an independent Appeals Board.

The Primary Staffing Appeals Board considered a staffing appeal from the school referred to by the Deputy under the Small Schools criteria. The Appeals Board has deemed the appeal ineligible and the school has been notified of this decision.

The Primary Staffing Appeals Board operates independently of the Department and its decision is final.

Question No. 311 answered with Question No. 159.

Special Educational Needs

312. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the July provision scheme in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6513/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am committed to running a summer Provision type programme for children with complex needs this year as soon as it is safe to do so and in accordance with public health advice.

My Department is exploring a number of options for a summer education programme for children with complex special needs.

The primary aim of the proposed programme would be to limit potential regression in learning thereby ensuring in so far as possible that these children can reintegrate and transition into their planned education setting for next year with their peers.

This may be done through a targeted level of supports to address regression of social skills and re-establish tolerance of routines paving the way for reintegrating full time into education

when schools reopen in the autumn.

Departmental Data

313. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of students from Singapore studying here; if he in conjunction with Enterprise Ireland is taking additional steps to attract more students from Singapore to come here to study; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6514/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): There were 484 students from Singapore studying in Ireland in our universities, institutes of technology and private colleges in the 2017/18 academic year.

In 2017, Enterprise Ireland, under the Education in Ireland brand, dedicated a new full time education resource based in Singapore to develop international education links and opportunities in the ASEAN region for Irish higher education institutions.

As a result of the COVID pandemic, Education in Ireland is currently working on attracting students from Singapore by increasing social media engagement in the region, by hosting online webinars with agents, international schools and students in the region and by developing and participating in online education fairs where Irish higher education institutions showcase their colleges to students from the region.

DEIS Scheme

314. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated full-year cost if the capitation paid to DEIS schools increased by 30%; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6525/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Deputy will be aware that on the 6th May last, I announced the early payment of the €16 million DEIS grant for the 2020/21 school year.

The funding was paid ahead of schedule to all schools in the DEIS programme to help support students who are most at risk of educational disadvantage during the Covid-19 school closures.

There are currently 890 schools with more than 180,000 students in the DEIS programme.

In the event that there was an increase of 30% in the DEIS Grant, the annualised grant would be €21m approximately, based on the 2020/21 grants at Primary and Post-Primary level. Schools should use the DEIS grant to implement measures to support their targets in the various themes as set out under DEIS Plan.

Question No. 315 answered with Question No. 159.

Student Universal Support Ireland

316. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated full-year cost of each 2.5% increase in grants under the SUSI scheme. [6537/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The estimated full year cost to increase the maintenance grant rates by 2.5% is €4m.

Special Educational Needs Staff

317. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated full-year cost of each 250 new special needs assistants recruited. [6538/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department's policy is to ensure that every child who is assessed as needing Special Needs Assistant (SNA) support will receive access to such support.

In 2019, in the region of €1.9 billion was invested in Special Education, nearly one fifth of the overall Education budget. Budget 2020 has provided for 1,064 additional SNAs posts, for allocation in 2020, which will bring the total number of SNA posts in schools to over 17,000 in 2020, an increase of over 60% since 2011. The additional cost of these posts is €13 million and the provisional 2020 total allocation to SNA pay is €602 million.

The pay at entry of a new entrant Special Needs Assistant, inclusive of employer PRSI, is €27,674 so the estimated cost of 250 SNAs would be €6,918,500.

Special Educational Needs Staff

318. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of new special needs assistants that will be recruited to deal with children and young persons on their return to school in view of the Covid-19 pandemic. [6539/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Budget 2020 has provided for 1,064 additional SNAs posts, for allocation in 2020, which will bring the total number of SNA posts in schools to over 17,000 in 2020, an increase of over 60% since 2011.

Schools have been notified of the arrangements for the allocation of SNA support in respect of students in mainstream classes for 2020/21. The arrangements include the following provisions:

- 2019/20 mainstream class SNA allocations will be frozen, from the date of issue of Circular 0030/2020, and will automatically rollover into the 2020/21 school year. This means that no school will receive an allocation less than that which they have on the date of issue of this Circular and existing SNAs currently in standard SNA posts can continue in these posts for the next school year in the normal way.

- Schools may apply to the NCSE for additionality where they can demonstrate that the current allocation does not meet additional care needs within the mainstream classes in the school. Applications for additionality arising from significant new or emerging additional care needs, which cannot be catered within existing allocations, will be dealt with by way of an exceptional review process.

- A diagnosis of a disability, or a psychological or other professional report, will not be necessary for this process.

- The role of the SNA to support the care needs of students in mainstream classes, as set out in Circular 0030/2014, remains unchanged.

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- It is expected that schools will review and reprioritise the deployment of SNAs within mainstream settings and allocate resources to ensure those with the greatest level of need receive the greatest level of support. Providing access to SNA support continues to be based on primary care needs as outlined in DES Circular 0030/2014.

Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website www.ncse.ie.

The NCSE will endeavour to respond to all applications for exceptional review received prior to 22nd May 2020 by 30th June 2020 and in that regard, it will prioritise applications from schools with no current SNA allocation and developing schools.

Applications for an Exceptional Review received after 22 May 2020 will continue to be processed once all other applications have been completed.

The exceptional review process for mainstream allocations will be available to schools throughout the 2020/21 school year.

A new frontloading model for allocating Special Needs Assistants to primary and post primary schools for students in mainstream classes only was to be introduced in the 2020/21 school year as part of the phased roll out of the School Inclusion Model (SIM). Due to the disruption caused by the Covid-19 public health crisis, the introduction of the model has been deferred for one year.

Question No. 319 answered with Question No. 222.

Question No. 320 answered with Question No. 150.

Special Educational Needs

321. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the July provision scheme; and the arrangements in place for families and teachers that wish to avail of the scheme. [6567/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am committed to running a summer Provision type programme for children with complex needs this year as soon as it is safe to do so and in accordance with public health advice.

My Department is exploring a number of options for a summer education programme for children with complex special needs.

The primary aim of the proposed programme would be to limit potential regression in learning thereby ensuring in so far as possible that these children can reintegrate and transition into their planned education setting for next year with their peers.

This may be done through a targeted level of supports to address regression of social skills and re-establish tolerance of routines paving the way for reintegrating full time into education when schools reopen in the autumn.

Special Educational Needs

322. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if there will be an increase in the number of special education teachers and SNAs provided to all schools in the

2020/2021 school year in order to ameliorate the loss of in-school teaching time for these students in view of the fact that young persons in SEN and DEIS settings are most likely to have experienced difficulties engaging in remote learning; if class sizes will be reduced in DEIS schools, special schools and mainstream schools in line with the demands of unions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6583/20]

327. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which he plans to address the issues arising from the isolating of children required to reduce the spread of Covid-19; if the NCSE will facilitate additional supports to children and school communities; if the number of SNAs and SENs will be increased to meet demand; if his Department is liaising with the HSE to increase staffing and resources to the early intervention and school age assessment teams to clear the backlog of waiting lists in addition to the supports and therapies children will need to engage with once the services return to operation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6588/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 322 and 327 together.

I wish to advise the Deputy that decisions in relation to schools re-opening and operating will be underpinned by the ongoing advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and the Department of Health.

Engagement is underway with stakeholders in the education sector to develop contingency plans for the re-opening and operation of schools in an environment that may require social distancing and other public health requirements.

This work will be informed by the National Return to Work Safely Protocol as well as guidance and experience from other jurisdictions. A core objective of the contingency plans will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

The issues are also being considered by the Primary Education Forum which includes all stakeholders in the sector and it will also be addressed by the Advisory Group which involves representatives of stakeholders from the post-primary sector.

In the interim, my Department has provided a range of support and guidance for schools on how to provide for the continuing education for pupils over the current school closure period.

Supports are provided to schools and teachers engaged in distance learning and these are available at <https://www.education.ie/en/covid-19/#14>

In addition to the general guidance that has been provided for schools, additional support material has also been provided specifically on how schools should provide for the continuity of education for children with special educational needs. This guidance is available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-pupils-with-sen-primary.pdf>

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-students-with-sen-post-primary.pdf>

The guidance notes that there is a particular need for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) to have regular, ongoing schooling. While all pupils need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, those with SEN are among those who need most support at this

time. Examples of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of pupils with SEN are catered for, are provided in the guidance documents and a range of resources are also identified for parents.

It sets out the role of schools and teachers in engaging with pupils with SEN and the role of teachers and school leaders to support such pupils. It advises schools as to how best to keep in touch with parents and guardians and how to keep pupils with SEN safe and engaged in the distance learning environment.

The guidance sets out the role of the special education teacher to support children with special educational needs at this time. It notes that the special education teacher's knowledge of their pupils' priority learning needs and agreed targets, as outlined in the pupil support file, will enable them to work with parents and guardians to choose appropriate supports in a remote learning environment.

Special Education Teachers (SETs) are asked to carefully examine how progress on the existing learning targets in student support plans can be reasonably extended by home learning. They are asked to use this knowledge to communicate with the pupils and their parents and guardians and to establish what methods will work best to achieve continuity of learning for the pupils.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is also providing a range of online resources for parents and teachers to support home learning for children with special educational needs during the Covid 19 restrictions.

In addition to the normal supports, the NCSE is providing online resources for children with Special Educational Needs who are at home as a result of the schools' closure.

Supports provided include those relating to general learning and difficulties for pupils with SEN, Curriculum support, speech language and communication, occupational therapy support, guidance around behaviour, and learning and resources on 'Visiting Teachers Support' for a teacher who teaches children with sensory impairment

Details of the full range of supports that the NCSE provides for teachers and parents is available at:

<https://ncse.ie/online-resources>

The Department of Education and Skills' NEPS psychologists have also developed advice and resources for young people to manage and stay well when schools are closed. The NEPS advice & resources for keeping children and young people well during Covid-19 are available at <https://www.education.ie/covid19/wellbeing/>

Guidelines for continued provision of Guidance Counselling and resources available to support practice is available at <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Post-Primary-School-Policies/Policies/Guidance-Plan.html>

Guidance for parents of primary school pupils, which sets out what they should expect in relation to engagement in distance learning from schools, and how they can support their child in a home schooling environment is also available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/continuity-of-schooling/continuity-of-schooling.html>

I also recently announced that a special €10 million fund is being made available to support

the purchase of technology and devices for disadvantaged students, including students with special educational needs.

This is additional to the latest round of funding for ICT under the Digital Strategy for Schools whereby €40m grant funding will be distributed in the coming weeks to eligible. €10m additional funding is also now issuing to schools to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

There are currently no proposals to review the existing criteria for the allocation of Special Education Teachers or Special Needs Assistants for schools, or to adjust the current criteria of the allocation of DEIS supports, or school class sizes, due to matters arising from COVID 19. This matter, and matters in relation to social distancing, will be kept under review in the context of public health advice regarding schools re-opening and the ongoing advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE).

The DEIS programme allows for a reduced class size in Urban Band 1 primary schools with the application of a preferential staffing schedule to these schools of 20:1 at junior classes and 24:1 at senior classes to support those students at the highest risk of educational disadvantage. DEIS Plan acknowledges the allocation of teaching resources to DEIS primary schools with the highest concentrations of children at risk of educational disadvantage has served to improve learning outcomes. It also commits to the evaluation of the level of teaching resources for schools participating in DEIS to be undertaken to inform future policy in this area.

In order to facilitate this a Class Size Working Group was established comprising representatives from the Education Partners, the Educational Research Centre and the relevant Business Units in my Department.

A report on the work of this group is currently being finalised, and will take into consideration the feedback and observations of the working group members. When the report is finalised its findings will inform future policy direction in this area.

Questions in relation to the staffing of Health Service Executive (HSE) Assessment Teams and HSE Therapy services should be referred to Department of Health and the HSE, however, it should be noted that an assessment of a particular diagnosis of special educational need is no longer required for pupils to access special education teaching support in schools and is not required for access to the SNA scheme for the 2020/21 school year.

While recognising the difficulty that school closure has had for parents and pupils, particularly in relation to pupils with special educational needs, my Department will continue to support and encourage schools to provide as much continuity of education as possible for such pupils, while continuing to engage with public health officials and stakeholders in relation to when schools may re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

Public Sector Staff Sick Leave

323. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will reinstate the sick leave entitlements of teachers that existed prior to 2010 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6584/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Sick Leave Scheme for teachers is regulated by the Public Service Management (Sick Leave) Regulations, as amended. These Regulations encompass all public sector employees, including teachers.

The provisions regarding the arrangements for teachers to cater for COVID-19 including special leave with pay are set out in Circular 0024/2020. Any special leave with pay granted for the purpose of diagnosis of COVID-19, self-isolation will not be counted as part of the teacher's Sick Leave record.

School Accommodation

324. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if an audit of all school buildings will be carried out with a view to ascertaining the works needed to be completed to allow the safe return of students and staff; if special additional funding will be made available to schools to facilitate, among other actions, the hiring of cleaning staff to work throughout the school day, the installation of hand washing and sanitising stations, the erection of appropriate signage and the rearrangement of school layout and the acquisition of temporary additional accommodation and or the building of additional classrooms as appropriate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6585/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): On the 1st May 2020, the Taoiseach announced as part of the "Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business" that schools will commence opening on a phased basis at the beginning of the 2020/2021 academic year. The Department is currently working with the Education Partners and relevant stakeholders in planning for this re-opening which will be based on public health advice. As part of this engagement, each of the education partners were given the opportunity to outline the key issues that they would like to have considered in the context of re-opening schools. The issues raised by the education partners included many of those referred to by the Deputy in his question. These will now be worked through in detail as part of the development of the roadmap for reopening schools.

A core objective will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

Covid-19 Pandemic

325. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on whether the school system is fit for purpose to facilitate social distancing norms in view of the fact Ireland has the largest class sizes in Europe and one of the lowest levels of funding per student in the OECD; the number of additional class teachers that would be required in the forthcoming school year to reduce class sizes to average EU levels; the estimated cost and the way in which it could be achieved; the additional funding required to bring funding for education at primary, secondary and third-level in line with that of average OECD levels for 2020/2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6586/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Budget 2020 has provided for a budget of more than €11 billion for the Department of Education and Skills in 2020. This is the highest ever allocation to the sector and an increase of nearly €2 billion since 2016.

The number of teachers has increased from 63,556 in 2015/16 to almost 70,900 in 2019/20, an increase of over 7,300 teaching posts.

Teacher numbers at primary level have increased by almost 3,500 when comparing the 2015/16 school year with the current school year and this has led to a steady improvement in the pupil teacher ratio and average class size statistics during this period.

The latest figures in relation to pupil teacher ratio show an improved ratio of teachers to students from 16:1 to 15.2:1 at primary level when comparing the 2015/16 school year to the 2018/19 school year. Average class sizes at primary level improved from 24.9 to 24.3 in the same period. Corresponding statistics from post primary level show an improved ratio of teachers to students from 13.8:1 to 13:1 during the same period.

The annual staffing schedule determines the allocation of teachers to schools. For the current school year, it operates on a general average of 26 pupils to every 1 teacher (26:1) which is historically the lowest ever allocation ratio at primary level. At post-primary level teachers are allocated at a ratio of 19:1 in the Free Education System and 23:1 to schools in the fee-charging sector. Approximately 300 teaching posts would be required for each 1 point adjustment to the primary staffing schedule, while approximately 1,150 teaching posts would be required for each 1 point adjustment on the post-primary side.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol will inform discussions with all education partners so that appropriate guidance for schools is developed and arrangements put in place in time for the new school year.

Special Educational Needs

326. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to facilitate July provisions (details supplied); if it will go ahead; if so, when; the way in which it will run while keeping educators and children safe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6587/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am committed to running a summer Provision type programme for children with complex needs this year as soon as it is safe to do so and in accordance with public health advice.

My Department is exploring a number of options for a summer education programme for children with complex special needs.

The primary aim of the proposed programme would be to limit potential regression in learning thereby ensuring in so far as possible that these children can reintegrate and transition into their planned education setting for next year with their peers.

This may be done through a targeted level of supports to address regression of social skills and re-establish tolerance of routines paving the way for reintegrating full time into education when schools reopen in the autumn.

Question No. 327 answered with Question No. 322.

Question No. 328 answered with Question No. 159.

Special Educational Needs

329. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the July provision programme for children with additional needs; if extra supports are being considered for them in the absence of their school and daily routine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6596/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am committed to running a

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summer Provision type programme for children with complex needs this year as soon as it is safe to do so and in accordance with public health advice.

My Department is exploring a number of options for a summer education programme for children with complex special needs.

The primary aim of the proposed programme would be to limit potential regression in learning thereby ensuring in so far as possible that these children can reintegrate and transition into their planned education setting for next year with their peers.

This may be done through a targeted level of supports to address regression of social skills and re-establish tolerance of routines paving the way for reintegrating full time into education when schools reopen in the autumn.

Questions Nos. 330 to 334, inclusive, answered with Question No. 159.

Special Educational Needs

335. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to provide the July provision for special needs students in July as normal or August as per public health advice; and if the traditional provision is not possible in 2020, the alternatives that are under consideration otherwise special needs children will go six months without attending class. [6605/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am committed to running a summer Provision type programme for children with complex needs this year as soon as it is safe to do so and in accordance with public health advice.

My Department is exploring a number of options for a summer education programme for children with complex special needs.

The primary aim of the proposed programme would be to limit potential regression in learning thereby ensuring in so far as possible that these children can reintegrate and transition into their planned education setting for next year with their peers.

This may be done through a targeted level of supports to address regression of social skills and re-establish tolerance of routines paving the way for reintegrating full time into education when schools reopen in the autumn.

Third Level Admissions

336. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the CAO will allow flexibility for students that may have missed the 1 May 2020 deadline in view of the situation in which sixth year students have not been in schools with direct contact with career guidance teachers; if the case of a person (details supplied) will be examined in relation to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6608/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are governed by the Universities Act 1997, the Institutes of Technologies Acts 1992 to 2006 and the Technological Universities Act 2018. Within the meaning of these Acts, higher education institutions are autonomous with regard to management of their academic affairs including admissions procedures. The CAO process applications for undergraduate, and

some postgraduate, courses on behalf of the HEIs. Decisions on admissions are made by the HEIs who then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates.

As such, neither I nor my Department has any role in relation to the operation of the CAO. Queries on these processes should be sent directly to the CAO, contact details for which can be found on their website www.cao.ie

Asylum Seekers

337. **Deputy Stephen Donnelly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the educational supports available for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6624/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department provides a range of supports to schools to meet the identified additional educational needs of the children and young people in the primary and post-primary systems. These include additional resource teachers, special educational needs supports, and services from National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), Schools participating in the DEIS Programme may also avail of the Home School Community Liaison and School Completion Programmes, overseen by Tusla Education Support Service (TESS), and additional funding to support interventions for children at risk of poor educational outcomes by virtue of their socio-economic background.

All mainstream schools receive an allocation of special education teaching support to provide additional teaching support for pupils with special educational needs or learning support needs, including English Additional Language (EAL) needs, in accordance with the criteria set put in DES Circular 007/2019 and 008/2019. The Special Education Teaching allocation provides a single unified allocation for special educational support teaching needs to each school, based on each school's educational profile. Schools are provided with a total allocation which includes a baseline allocation for the school and an allocation based on the school's profile.

Where schools can demonstrate that they have high concentrations of pupils requiring EAL they can apply for Additional Allocations for Schools with High Concentrations of Pupils that require Language Support (EAL) in accordance with the procedures set out in the primary or post primary school staffing schedules for the 2020/21 school year (Circular 18/2020).

Tusla Education Support Services (TESS) of the Child and Family Agency is the statutory body which can assist in securing a school placement. I am advised that, with the support of TESS, an application has been made for a school place for September, 2020 for the individual referred to by the Deputy. My Department has provided a Home Tuition Grant pending this placement.

State Examinations

338. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education and Skills further to Covid Query No. 3.538, if the application for invigilators of leaving certificate examinations will be opened to non-teachers when a new date is set for students wishing to take their examinations. [6633/20]

394. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to the fact that service delivery staff had been employed for a number of weeks of the year by the State Examinations Commission will now not be employed disrupt-

ing their pattern of employment; and his views on whether functions can be found for the staff to ensure that they are kept in employment in view of the fact the delivery of calculated grades in 2020 will be labour intensive. [6922/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 338 and 394 together.

The State Examinations Commission (SEC) is responsible for the recruitment of individuals to supervise and mark the examinations. At present, suitably qualified teachers are eligible to apply for such positions. The 2020 Leaving Certificate examinations have been postponed until a future date when it will be safe to run them. The SEC will consider its staffing requirements at that time.

Question No. 339 answered with Question No. 247.

Schools Building Projects Status

340. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status and progress of a school building project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6648/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The project referred to by the Deputy has been devolved to the National Development Finance Agency (NDFA) for delivery as part of a programme of school building projects.

The NDFA is currently undertaking the second phase of the process of appointment of multi-disciplinary technical advisors (design teams) for these projects. This process will involve a number of call-off competitions for bundles of projects from a framework.

Thereafter, the NDFA will ensure that the project progresses to design stage, obtains the necessary statutory planning permission, and moves the project onward to tender and 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 its completion.

Please be assured that the NDFA will be engaging directly with the school authority to keep it informed of progress.

Schools Building Projects Status

341. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status and progress of a school building project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6649/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The delivery of a new building for the school to which the Deputy refers has been devolved to Kildare and Wicklow Education & Training Board (KWETB).

The Stage 1 (preliminary design) process has recently been completed and the project has commenced Stage 2A (detailed design).

Schools Building Projects Status

342. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status and progress of a school building project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6650/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The joint project for the schools referred to by the Deputy is at an advanced stage of the tender process. My Department is currently awaiting the return of the supplementary tender report.

Subject to no issues arising, it is envisaged that construction should commence following the finalisation of the tender process with a contract duration of approximately 22 months.

Schools Building Projects Status

343. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status and progress of a school building project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6651/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The major project for the construction of the new school building for the school referred to by the deputy is at an advanced stage of the tender process and my Department is currently awaiting the return of the supplementary tender report.

Subject to no issues arising, it is envisaged that construction should commence following the finalisation of the tender process with a contract duration of approximately 20 months.

The tender process for the provision of the second phase of the temporary accommodation on the existing school site has completed and the Letter of Acceptance has issued.

Schools Building Projects Status

344. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status and progress of a school building project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6652/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The project referred to by the Deputy has been devolved to the National Development Finance Agency (NDFA) for delivery as part of a programme of school building projects.

The NDFA is currently undertaking the second phase of the process of appointment of multi-disciplinary technical advisors (design teams) for these projects. This process will involve a number of call-off competitions for bundles of projects from a framework.

Thereafter, the NDFA will ensure that the project progresses to design stage, obtains the necessary statutory planning permission, and moves the project onward to tender and 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 its completion.

Please be assured that the NDFA will be engaging directly with the school authority to keep it informed of progress.

Schools Building Projects Status

345. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status and progress of a school building project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6653/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I can confirm for the Deputy that my Department is currently undertaking a site identification exercise in order to appraise suitable sites for the school to which you refer. This exercise is being conducted in line with current restrictions in place due to the covid-19 pandemic, nevertheless, my officials are making progress on the exercise. Due to obvious commercial sensitivities, I cannot elaborate any further at this juncture but please rest assured that the project is being given due consideration and attention.

School Accommodation Provision

346. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when long-standing proposals to provide additional permanent accommodation and upgrade existing accommodation at a school (details supplied) will be advanced to the next stage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6661/20]

347. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when long-standing proposals to provide additional permanent accommodation and upgrade existing accommodation at a school (details supplied) will be advanced to the next stage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6662/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 346 and 347 together.

The schools referred to by the Deputy are due to amalgamate. Both schools will continue to operate from the existing school sites until a new school building is provided for the amalgamated school.

The new amalgamated school building will enable facilities to be modernised in an energy efficient building that will be compliant with Part L of the Building Regulations 2017. It will also provide the opportunity for the new school building to have a fully equipped PE Hall facility with fitness suite together with provision of accommodation to meet special education needs in West Cavan at Port-Primary level.

School Accommodation Provision

348. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when proposals to provide additional permanent accommodation and upgrade existing accommodation at a school (details supplied) will be advanced to the next stage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6663/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is in receipt of an application, for capital funding for additional school accommodation, from the school referred to by the Deputy.

The application is under consideration and officials have recently sought additional information from the School authority in this regard. As soon as this information is received the application will be progressed and a decision will be conveyed directly to the school authority.

Questions - Written Answers
Student Support Schemes

349. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if additional financial supports will be provided for third-level students unable to work during the summer period; and if SUSI eligibility will be reviewed to assist students facing financial difficulties due to Covid-19. [6665/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am conscious of the difficulties being experienced by students and their families as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and of the importance of the Student Grant Scheme and related supports, such as the Student Assistance Fund and the Fund for Students with Disabilities. These supports have a fundamental role in assisting families who are putting their children through further and higher education.

Accordingly, the following arrangements have been put in place:

Student grant payments for academic year 2019/20 will continue as normal. The duration and value of the grant will not change.

Student grant applications for academic year 2020/21 will be assessed based on income earned in 2019.

If a student or party to their application experiences a change in circumstances that is not a temporary change and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, they can apply to have their application assessed under the change in circumstances provision of the relevant Student Grant Scheme. Following such a review, the applicant may fall within the thresholds to become eligible for grant assistance or be entitled to an increased rate of grant or the special rate of grant.

The Student Grant Scheme provides for different levels of income thresholds where families have (i) less than 4 dependent children (ii) between 4 and 7 dependent children and (iii) 8 or more dependent children. In recognition of the additional cost to families where more than one person is attending college, income thresholds may also be increased by up to €4,830 for each additional family member attending college at the same time. In this way, the Student Grant Scheme is responsive to the individual circumstances of particular families.

The income threshold for the special rate of grant has been increased from €24,000 to €24,500 for the 2020 scheme, so as to ensure that students from families dependent on welfare will continue to be eligible for the special rate of grant. (This reflects the Budget 2019 increase to the maximum point of the weekly State Contributory Pension, plus maximum Qualified Adult Allowance for a person over 66 years).

The Student Assistance Fund (SAF) provides financial assistance to students experiencing financial difficulties while attending third level. Students can be assisted towards the rent, childcare costs, transport costs and books/class materials. The total allocation for the SAF is €9.1 million which includes an additional €1m added to the Fund in 2017 for part-time students who are lone-parents or members of the other access target groups. Prior to that the fund supported full-time students only. In December 2018 a further €1 million was added to the Fund for students attending Professional Masters of Education courses, who are experiencing financial difficulty. This funding continued into 2019 and 2020. Institutions have the autonomy to maximise the flexibility in the Student Assistance Fund to enable HEIs to support students during the COVID-19 situation.

The Deputy will appreciate that the funding allocation for the student grant scheme and the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) is determined in the context of the overall estimates and

budgetary process undertaken by all Government Departments. However, all proposals made in relation to education expenditure will be considered in the context of Budget 2021, having regard to overall resource constraints and other competing demands in the education sector.

In addition, tax relief at the standard rate of tax may be claimed in respect of tuition fees paid for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education. Further information on this tax relief is available from a student's local Tax Office or from the Revenue Commissioners website, www.revenue.ie.

Student Universal Support Ireland

350. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the criteria for a SUSI application change of circumstances assessment or reassessment (details supplied) due to Covid-19. [6666/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The decision on eligibility for a student grant is a matter for the centralised student grant awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) to determine.

The Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment will not affect student grants in the academic year 2019/20. Students will continue to receive their maintenance grants as normal and the duration or value of the grant will not change.

For the 20/21 academic year student grant applications will be assessed based on gross income from all sources for the period 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2019.

However as you are aware, if a student or party to their application experiences a change in circumstances that is not a temporary change and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future they can apply to have their application assessed under the change in circumstances provision.

When an employment ceases, such as in cases of redundancy, there is always the possibility that the person could commence new employment shortly thereafter and there is also the possibility that the person will remain unemployed for a considerable length of time. For this reason any applicant who is awarded a grant, or has their grant level increased, following the implementation of the change of circumstances conditions may be reviewed by SUSI later in the academic year.

In the case of a change of circumstances all household income, and not just the income of the person experiencing the change, will be assessed/reassessed on the basis of the current year (2020). The change of circumstance is not applied retrospectively. Therefore, if the change occurs during the academic year, any award or adjustment will take effect from the month in which the change occurred. This provision may benefit some students whose income has fallen in 2020 due to Covid-19 issues.

SUSI's online application process for student grant applications for the 2020/21 academic year opened on 23rd April, 2020. Students are advised to submit their renewal student grant application as soon as possible. The priority closing dates for the 2020/21 academic year are 11 June 2020 for renewal applicants and 9 July 2020 for new applicants.

Further information in relation to student grant assistance is available from SUSI's website, www.susi.ie. The telephone number for SUSI's Helpdesk is 0761 087 874.

Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, students in third-level institutions experiencing ex-

ceptional financial need can apply for support under the Student Assistance Fund. This Fund assists full-time and part-time students, in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Details of this fund are available from the Access Office in the third level institution attended. Institutions have the autonomy to maximise the flexibility in the Student Assistance Fund to enable HEIs to support students during the COVID-19 situation.

In addition, tax relief at the standard rate of tax may be claimed in respect of tuition fees paid for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education. Further information on this tax relief is available from students' local Tax Offices or from the Revenue Commissioners website, www.revenue.ie.

School Accommodation Provision

351. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if approval will issue at an early date in respect of a proposed building project for a school (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6685/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I can confirm to the Deputy that the school referred to, has submitted an application to my Department, for capital funding, under the 'Additional School Accommodation' scheme.

The application is under consideration and officials have recently sought additional information from the School authority in this regard. As soon as this information is received the application will be progressed and a decision will be conveyed directly to the school authority.

Schools Facilities

352. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when approval will issue in respect of the provision of new facilities at a school (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6686/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I can confirm that my Department has received an application for capital funding from the school, to which the Deputy refers, for a Sports Hall.

Under the National Development Plan, 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, to include the building and modernisation of PE facilities.

Under Project Ireland 2040, we will invest €8.4 billion in primary and post primary school buildings. The government is committed to a PE Hall build and modernisation programme, escalating in the second half of the Project Ireland 2040 period. The school in question will be considered in this context.

Details of large-scale projects being delivered under the school building programme may be viewed on my Department's website, www.education.ie and this information is updated regularly.

Special Educational Needs

353. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if it is proposed to have a July education programme in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6687/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am committed to running a summer Provision type programme for children with complex needs this year as soon as it is safe to do so and in accordance with public health advice.

My Department is exploring a number of options for a summer education programme for children with complex special needs.

The primary aim of the proposed programme would be to limit potential regression in learning thereby ensuring in so far as possible that these children can reintegrate and transition into their planned education setting for next year with their peers.

This may be done through a targeted level of supports to address regression of social skills and re-establish tolerance of routines paving the way for reintegrating full time into education when schools reopen in the autumn.

Special Educational Needs

354. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of plans for the July provision; if it is still planned to go ahead; if so, the arrangements that are being considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6696/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am committed to running a summer Provision type programme for children with complex needs this year as soon as it is safe to do so and in accordance with public health advice.

My Department is exploring a number of options for a summer education programme for children with complex special needs.

The primary aim of the proposed programme would be to limit potential regression in learning thereby ensuring in so far as possible that these children can reintegrate and transition into their planned education setting for next year with their peers.

This may be done through a targeted level of supports to address regression of social skills and re-establish tolerance of routines paving the way for reintegrating full time into education when schools reopen in the autumn.

Question No. 355 answered with Question No. 159.

Question No. 356 answered with Question No. 228.

Covid-19 Pandemic

357. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if teachers that live more than 5 km from their schools will be able to travel to those schools as a necessary journey to undertake preparatory work for September 2020 under phase 1 of the Roadmap on Reopening Society and Business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6704/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Phase one of the roadmap to ease Covid-19 restrictions and reopen Ireland's economy and society sets out that school buildings will be open for access by teachers for organisation and distribution of remote learning from the 18 May. The 5km limit does not apply in this circumstance.

My Department has published guidance to assist school staff accessing schools on the 18 May which is available on the Covid-19 page of the Department's website.

Social distancing and compliance with public health guidance is the key requirement, access to schools by teachers should be minimised and only in circumstances where the work cannot be done remotely.

Third Level Education

358. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will request QQI, CORU and other relevant bodies to review the requirement for 800 hours of unpaid placement to be completed by social care work students before graduation in view of the exceptional circumstances surrounding Covid-19; if alternative mechanisms can be found to allow sufficiently competent students to graduate and progress to paid employment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6713/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Since the onset of the Covid-19 outbreak, significant work has been undertaken by a stakeholder group chaired by the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and including the representative bodies of education providers to address issues relating to the maintenance of the quality and standards of teaching and learning, assessment and qualifications. This group has focused on the implementation of alternative arrangements, where appropriate and necessary, to meet both these standards and, where applicable, the educational accreditation criteria established by Professional Recognition Bodies (PRBs).

In the case of Social Care, the awards standards established by QQI reflect the accreditation criteria that have been set out by CORU, Ireland's multi-profession Health and Social Care Regulator and consequently the relevant PRB for this profession. Engagement is ongoing between members of the stakeholders group, QQI and CORU to ensure that necessary arrangements are put in place to maintain standards of education and training in this area so that students graduate with the relevant professional competencies that have been set out by CORU and which are reflected in QQI's award standards.

Question No. 359 answered with Question No. 248.

Third Level Education

360. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will address a matter regarding scholarships (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6726/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Like 2019, it is anticipated that the majority of my Department's Third Level bursaries for 2020 will be awarded once results have issued with some bursaries withheld until all the appeals processes have been exhausted.

Special Educational Needs

361. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if clarity will be provided to parents with children suffering from autistic spectrum disorders and severe to profound learning disabilities with regard to the home-based July provision scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6729/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am committed to running a summer Provision type programme for children with complex needs this year as soon as it is safe to do so and in accordance with public health advice.

My Department is exploring a number of options for a summer education programme for children with complex special needs.

The primary aim of the proposed programme would be to limit potential regression in learning thereby ensuring in so far as possible that these children can reintegrate and transition into their planned education setting for next year with their peers.

This may be done through a targeted level of supports to address regression of social skills and re-establish tolerance of routines paving the way for reintegrating full time into education when schools reopen in the autumn.

Special Educational Needs

362. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to a recent survey and report (details supplied); and his views on the recommendations of same. [6734/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am aware that Inclusion Ireland has recently published a report on ‘The Implications of COVID-19 on the Education of Pupils with Intellectual Disabilities and Autism- Supporting Children to Learn’.

The recommendations included in this report will be taken into account as we review guidance for schools on supporting children with special educational needs during the school closure period and as we seek to reopen schools.

Decisions in relation to schools re-opening and operating will be underpinned by the ongoing advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE).

Engagement is underway with stakeholders in the education sector to develop contingency plans for the re-opening and operation of schools in an environment that may require social distancing and other public health requirements.

This work will be based on the National Return to Work Safely Protocol and will also be informed by guidance and experience from other jurisdictions. A core objective of the contingency plans will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

The issues are also being considered by the Primary Education Forum which includes all stakeholders in the sector and it will also be addressed by the Advisory Group which involves representatives of stakeholders from the post-primary sector.

In the interim, my Department has provided a range of support and guidance for schools on how to provide for the continuing education for pupils over the current school closure period.

Supports are provided to schools and teachers engaged in distance learning and these are available at

<https://www.education.ie/en/covid-19/#14>

In addition to the general guidance that has been provided for schools, additional support material has also been provided specifically on how schools should provide for the continuity of education for children with special educational needs. This guidance is available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-pupils-with-sen-primary.pdf>

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-students-with-sen-post-primary.pdf>

The guidance notes that there is a particular need for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) to have regular, ongoing schooling. While all pupils need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, those with SEN are among those who need most support at this time. Examples of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of pupils with SEN are catered for, are provided in the guidance documents and a range of resources are also identified for parents.

It sets out the role of schools and teachers in engaging with pupils with SEN and the role of teachers and school leaders to support such pupils. It advises schools as to how best to keep in touch with parents and guardians and how to keep pupils with SEN safe and engaged in the distance learning environment.

The guidance sets out the role of the special education teacher to support children with special educational needs at this time. It notes that the special education teacher's knowledge of their pupils' priority learning needs and agreed targets, as outlined in the pupil support file, will enable them to work with parents and guardians to choose appropriate supports in a remote learning environment.

Special Education Teachers (SETs) are asked to carefully examine how progress on the existing learning targets in student support plans can be reasonably extended by home learning. They are asked to use this knowledge to communicate with the pupils and their parents and guardians and to establish what methods will work best to achieve continuity of learning for the pupils.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is also providing a range of online resources for parents and teachers to support home learning for children with special educational needs during the Covid 19 restrictions.

In addition to the normal supports, the NCSE is providing online resources for children with Special Educational Needs who are at home as a result of the schools' closure.

Supports provided include those relating to general learning and difficulties for pupils with SEN, Curriculum support, speech language and communication, occupational therapy support, guidance around behaviour, and learning and resources on 'Visiting Teachers Support' for a teacher who

teaches children with sensory impairment.

Details of the full range of supports that the NCSE provides for teachers and parents is avail-

able at:

<https://ncse.ie/online-resources>

The Department of Education and Skills' NEPS psychologists have also developed advice and resources for young people to manage and stay well when schools are closed. The NEPS advice & resources for keeping children and young people well during Covid-19 are available at

<https://www.education.ie/covid19/wellbeing/>

Guidelines for continued provision of Guidance Counselling and resources available to support practice is available at

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Post-Primary-School-Policies/Policies/Guidance-Plan.html>

Guidance for parents of primary school pupils, which sets out what they should expect in relation to engagement in distance learning from schools, and how they can support their child in a home schooling environment is also available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/continuity-of-schooling/continuity-of-schooling.html>

I also recently announced that a special €10 million fund is being made available to support the purchase of technology and devices for disadvantaged students, including students with special educational needs.

This is additional to the latest round of funding for ICT under the Digital Strategy for Schools whereby €40m grant funding will be distributed in the coming weeks to eligible. €10m additional funding is also now issuing to schools to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

While recognising the difficulty that school closure has had for parents and pupils, particularly in relation to pupils with special educational needs, my Department will continue to support and encourage schools to provide as much continuity of education as possible for such pupils, while continuing to engage with public health officials and stakeholders in relation to when schools may re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

SOLAS Administration

363. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if SOLAS payments for apprentices have moved to fortnightly rather than weekly for all apprentices or only for on-site apprentices; if so, the reason therefore; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6769/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan): Craft apprentices undertaking off-the-job training moved from a weekly to a fortnightly pay period in March of this year.

Craft apprentices who are on a period of off-the-job training are paid from a shared services payroll which is provided by the Education Shared Business Services (ESBS). This replaced the end of life apprentice payment systems within the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Given that apprentice training allowances are taxable, the ESBS payroll also allows the Depart-

ment of Education and Skills to return the relevant payment information (Income Tax, USC and PRSI) to Revenue.

Craft apprentices who are undertaking their on-the-job training will continue to be paid under the arrangements agreed with their employer. In the case of the new consortia led apprenticeships, apprentices are paid by their employer for the duration of the apprenticeship so there is no change in their arrangements.

Question No. 364 answered with Question No. 159.

Question No. 365 answered with Question No. 150.

Special Educational Needs

366. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of ASD places that will be available for the new semester in the greater Dublin area for primary and secondary students; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6774/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Ensuring that every child has a suitable school placement is a key objective of my Department. Significant resources are allocated each year to ensure that appropriate supports are available for children with special educational needs.

Since 2011, the number of special classes in mainstream schools has increased almost three-fold, from 548 to 1,618 for the 2019/2020 school year, with 1,353 of these catering for children with autism. .

167 new special classes have been established nationally for the 2019/20 school year.

There are currently 165 primary classes and 48 post primary classes catering for children with autism in Dublin.

A list of special classes for September 2019 is available on the NCSE website at:

<https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/NCSE-List-of-Special-Classes-for-September-2019.pdf>

Budget 2020 provided for an additional 265 special class teachers in 2020, which will allow for the opening of additional classes where required.

The NCSE has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide; has well established structures in place for engaging with schools and parents; and seeks to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all children who have been identified as needing special class placements.

It is open to any school to make an application to the NCSE for the establishment of a specialised provision and where sanctioned, a range of supports, including capital funding, is made available to the school. In considering these applications, however, the NSCE, in conjunction with the school buildings unit of my Department, will be required to take into account the capacity of a school to establish such a class, including the provision of sufficient accommodation space within the school.

The NCSE is planning and finalising a further expansion of special class and special school places nationally to meet identified need for next year. As this process is ongoing, the final num-

ber of places available for students with ASD is not currently available.

Normally, special class and special school places are established with the full cooperation of the schools in areas where they are required. However there are some parts of the country where the NCSE has faced challenges in getting schools and their patrons to voluntarily agree to provide special class or special school places.

I know that this can cause much anguish for parents and families involved

As Minister I have a power under Section 37A of the Education Act 1998 to direct a school to provide additional provision where all reasonable efforts have failed.

I would prefer to see schools volunteer to provide more places rather than places being secured on the back of an order or a direction from me. It is the right thing for the children in a community.

The legislation was used for the first time in April 2019, in respect of the Dublin 15 area.

The NCSE's Local Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs) are available to assist and advise both schools and the parents of children with special educational needs in relation to specialised provision.

Since then, as required under the Act, the NCSE in consultation with the relevant education stakeholders, has been testing the capacity among schools in the South Dublin area.

On 21 April 2020 I received a report from the NCSE, pursuant to Section 37A(2) of the Education Act 1998 (as inserted by section 8 of the Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018) in respect of South Dublin, as the NCSE Council remains of the opinion that there is an insufficient number of special class and special school places within the South Dublin area for September 2020.

Before reaching this opinion, the NCSE has undertaken substantial work reviewing provision and accommodation in the 231 mainstream primary and 23 special schools in South Dublin.

Following engagement between NCSE local personnel and school management and Patrons, very good progress has been achieved. 78 ASD primary school special class placements and 12 ASD early intervention special class places have been created in 14 schools in South Dublin, with 13 new ASD special classes and 2 new ASD early intervention special classes to open for September 2020.

However, the NCSE has reported that to date, an insufficient number of schools have indicated a willingness to open additional special classes. The NCSE is of the opinion that should this continue, there remains a need for an additional 43 ASD primary special class places and 36 special school places in South Dublin.

The report also outlines the schools that should be requested to make additional provision.

This report will now be considered and if I agree with the position as set out by NCSE, next steps in the process will be considered which may include serving a statutory notice on schools identified if required.

At each stage of the process, schools are given the opportunity to make representations and there is also an option for arbitration.

Statutory notices issued under the Act together with the representations received from the

schools are published on the Department's website.

The necessary steps in the Admissions Act process, will continue to be expedited to ensure that every child has a suitable school placement, which is the key objective of my Department.

Covid-19 Pandemic

367. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if additional funding will be made available to schools and school boards to adapt premises or change hygiene protocols in order to deal with everyday safety realities of school returns. [6775/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): On the 1st May 2020, the Taoiseach announced as part of the "Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business" that schools will commence opening on a phased basis at the beginning of the 2020/2021 academic year.

The Department is currently working with the Education Partners and relevant stakeholders in planning for this re-opening which will be based on public health advice. A core objective will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

State Examinations

368. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to the new challenges the new leaving certificate results system will put on students hoping for a place in a college in Northern Ireland; and the mitigating measures he can introduce with the co-operation of his Northern Ireland counterpart to alleviate some of these difficulties. [6776/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Since early April, I have been in correspondence with the NI Minister for the Economy Diane Dodds (with responsibility for higher education) on the question on Irish students who plan to pursue their studies with higher education institutions in Northern Ireland. I have also written to the NI Minister for Education Peter Weir in a similar vein.

Since then, contacts are maintained regularly at official level. The Secretary General of my Department has engaged with NI Permanent Secretary in the Department of Education to promote cooperation on Covid 19 responses in education on a North-South basis, including sharing views on key policy decisions such as safe re-opening of schools, schools hygiene and maintaining social distance in education institutions. Other engagements at official level are continuing with the Department of Education in Northern Ireland and their Department of the Economy, as well as with UCAS, on issues affecting Irish students aiming to study in Northern Ireland next year.

Arising from my announcement about of the 2020 Leaving Certificate on 9 May, I am hopeful that the results will be available as close as possible to the intended date on which the Leaving Cert examination results were originally due.

Ministerial Communications

369. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the contact he has

had with his Northern Ireland counterpart during the Covid-19 pandemic; and the specific areas of cooperation they have agreed. [6777/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Since early April, I have been in correspondence with the NI Minister for the Economy Diane Dodds (with responsibility for higher education) on the question on Irish students who plan to pursue their studies with higher education institutions in Northern Ireland. I have also written to the NI Minister for Education Peter Weir in a similar vein.

Since then, contacts are maintained regularly at official level. The Secretary General of my Department has engaged with NI Permanent Secretary in the Department of Education to promote cooperation on Covid 19 responses in education on a North-South basis, including sharing views on key policy decisions such as safe re-opening of schools, schools hygiene and maintaining social distance in education institutions. Other engagements at official level are continuing with the Department of Education in Northern Ireland and their Department of the Economy, as well as with UCAS, on issues affecting Irish students aiming to study in Northern Ireland next year.

School Therapy Services

370. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the steps he will take to make therapy resources available using virtual or remote technology to support children with disabilities tying in with the pilot inclusion model, the NCSE and in partnership with the HSE. [6796/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to advise the Deputy that comprehensive therapy specific resources and guidance documents have been developed by Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists and Behaviour Practitioners to support home learning. These resources are available on the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) website and relevant resources and guidance documents have also been forwarded to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs for early years education. Each resource has been clearly explained in order to enable parents to identify the relevant resource(s) most applicable to the needs of their child.

In addition to the development of the resources and guidance documents, Demonstration Project Clinical Leads and therapists still working on the project have continued to link with some of the parents of children supported through the project. Teachers in project schools who requested resources and advice were also supported. Contact is now being made through schools and early learning and care settings with the parents of students who were in receipt of support at individualised Tier 3 level before the schools and settings closed.

My Department has provided a range of support and guidance for schools on how to provide for the continuing education for pupils over the current school closure period.

Supports are provided to schools and teachers engaged in distance learning and these are available at

<https://www.education.ie/en/covid-19/#14>

In additional to the general guidance that has been provided for schools, additional support material has also been provided specifically on how schools should provide for the continuity of education for children with special educational needs. This guidance is available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-pupils-with-sen-primary.pdf>

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-students-with-sen-post-primary.pdf>

The guidance notes that there is a particular need for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) to have regular, ongoing schooling. While all pupils need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, those with SEN are among those who need most support at this time. Examples of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of pupils with SEN are catered for, are provided in the guidance documents and a range of resources are also identified for parents.

It sets out the role of schools and teachers in engaging with pupils with SEN and the role of teachers and school leaders to support such pupils. It advises schools as to how best to keep in touch with parents and guardians and how to keep pupils with SEN safe and engaged in the distance learning environment.

The guidance sets out the role of the special education teacher to support children with special educational needs at this time. It notes that the special education teacher's knowledge of their pupils' priority learning needs and agreed targets, as outlined in the pupil support file, will enable them to work with parents and guardians to choose appropriate supports in a remote learning environment.

Special Education Teachers (SETs) are asked to carefully examine how progress on the existing learning targets in student support plans can be reasonably extended by home learning. They are asked to use this knowledge to communicate with the pupils and their parents and guardians and to establish what methods will work best to achieve continuity of learning for the pupils.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is also providing a range of online resources for parents and teachers to support home learning for children with special educational needs during the Covid 19 restrictions.

In addition to the normal supports, the NCSE is providing online resources for children with Special Educational Needs who are at home as a result of the schools' closure.

Supports provided include those relating to general learning and difficulties for pupils with SEN, Curriculum support, speech language and communication, occupational therapy support, guidance around behaviour, and learning and resources on 'Visiting Teachers Support' for a teacher who teaches children with sensory impairment.

Details of the full range of supports that the NCSE provides for teachers and parents is available at:

<https://ncse.ie/online-resources>

The Department of Education and Skills' NEPS psychologists have also developed advice and resources for young people to manage and stay well when schools are closed. The NEPS advice & resources for keeping children and young people well during Covid-19 are available at

<https://www.education.ie/covid19/wellbeing/>

Guidelines for continued provision of Guidance Counselling and resources available to support practice is available at

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Post-Primary-School-Policies/Policies/Guidance-Plan.html>

Guidance for parents of primary school pupils, which sets out what they should expect in relation to engagement in distance learning from schools, and how they can support their child in a home schooling environment is also available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/continuity-of-schooling/continuity-of-schooling.html>

I also recently announced that a special €10 million fund is being made available to support the purchase of technology and devices for disadvantaged students, including students with special educational needs.

This is additional to the latest round of funding for ICT under the Digital Strategy for Schools whereby €40m grant funding will be distributed in the coming weeks to eligible. €10m additional funding is also now issuing to schools to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

While recognising the difficulty that school closure has had for parents and pupils, particularly in relation to pupils with special educational needs, my Department will continue to support and encourage schools to provide as much continuity of education as possible for such pupils, while continuing to engage with public health officials and stakeholders in relation to when schools may re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

Special Educational Needs

371. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the additional provisions being made for students with special educational needs who are missing out on school supports at this time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6798/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has provided a range of support and guidance for schools on how to provide for the continuing education for pupils over the current school closure period.

Supports are provided to schools and teachers engaged in distance learning and these are available at

<https://www.education.ie/en/covid-19/#14>

In addition to the general guidance that has been provided for schools, additional support material has also been provided specifically on how schools should provide for the continuity of education for children with special educational needs. This guidance is available at:

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<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-students-with-sen-post-primary.pdf>

The guidance notes that there is a particular need for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) to have regular, ongoing schooling. While all pupils need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, those with SEN are among those who need most support at this time. Examples of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of pupils with SEN are catered for, are provided in the guidance documents and a range of resources are also identified for parents.

It sets out the role of schools and teachers in engaging with pupils with SEN and the role of teachers and school leaders to support such pupils. It advises schools as to how best to keep in touch with parents and guardians and how to keep pupils with SEN safe and engaged in the distance learning environment.

The guidance sets out the role of the special education teacher to support children with special educational needs at this time. It notes that the special education teacher's knowledge of their pupils' priority learning needs and agreed targets, as outlined in the pupil support file, will enable them to work with parents and guardians to choose appropriate supports in a remote learning environment.

Special Education Teachers (SETs) are asked to carefully examine how progress on the existing learning targets in student support plans can be reasonably extended by home learning. They are asked to use this knowledge to communicate with the pupils and their parents and guardians and to establish what methods will work best to achieve continuity of learning for the pupils.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is also providing a range of online resources for parents and teachers to support home learning for children with special educational needs during the Covid 19 restrictions.

In addition to the normal supports, the NCSE is providing online resources for children with Special Educational Needs who are at home as a result of the schools' closure.

Supports provided include those relating to general learning and difficulties for pupils with SEN, Curriculum support, speech language and communication, occupational therapy support, guidance around behaviour, and learning and resources on 'Visiting Teachers Support' for a teacher who teaches children with sensory impairment

Details of the full range of supports that the NCSE provides for teachers and parents is available at:

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The Department of Education and Skills' NEPS psychologists have also developed advice and resources for young people to manage and stay well when schools are closed. The NEPS advice & resources for keeping children and young people well during Covid-19 are available at

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Guidelines for continued provision of Guidance Counselling and resources available to support practice is available at <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Post-Primary-School-Policies/Policies/Guidance-Plan.html>

Guidance for parents of primary school pupils, which sets out what they should expect in relation to engagement in distance learning from schools, and how they can support their child in a home schooling environment is also available at:

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I also recently announced that a special €10 million fund is being made available to support the purchase of technology and devices for disadvantaged students, including students with special educational needs.

This is additional to the latest round of funding for ICT under the Digital Strategy for Schools whereby €40m grant funding will be distributed in the coming weeks to eligible. €10m additional funding is also now issuing to schools to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

While recognising the difficulty that school closure has had for parents and pupils, particularly in relation to pupils with special educational needs, my Department will continue to support and encourage schools to provide as much continuity of education as possible for such pupils, while continuing to engage with public health officials and stakeholders in relation to when schools may re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

Question No. 372 answered with Question No. 201.

School Accommodation Provision

373. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of a new building for a school (details supplied), the details of recent developments; and his plans to bring this project to fruition. [6813/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The major project for the construction of the new school building for the school referred to by the deputy is at an advanced stage of the tender process and my Department is currently awaiting the return of the supplementary tender report.

Subject to no issues arising, it is envisaged that construction should commence following the finalisation of the tender process with a contract duration of approximately 20 months.

The tender process for the provision of the second phase of the temporary accommodation on the existing school site has completed and the Letter of Acceptance has issued.

State Examinations

374. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will address a series of matters with regard to the calculated grades system (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6826/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Calculated Grades will be generated using a systematic model. It will combine estimates of a student's expected performance in a subject and level, with information about how students in the school have fared in this subject in recent years in line with national performance standards over time.

The first source of data will be provided by the subject teacher. It will then be aligned in the school, with teachers consulting on the results before the school's principal reviews the process applied to assure the fair treatment of students. The school then sends the data to my Department.

A detailed document *A Guide to Calculated Grades for Leaving Certificate students 2020* is available on my Department's website. It explains further how the system will work. Detailed guidance for teachers on the operation of the calculated grades system is being finalised for issue to schools shortly.

There will be strong oversight and control and a number of inherent quality assurance measures to ensure students receive as fair a result as possible. The principles of equity, fairness and objectivity are paramount in the calculated grades system. Teachers are to focus objectively on information that is clearly about attainment in the subject and not about other factors such as the student's background or circumstances.

Teachers are being asked to draw on existing records and other available evidence, to provide a fair, reasonable and carefully considered judgement of the most likely percentage mark that each student would have achieved if they had sat their examinations and completed coursework under normal conditions.

Teachers will use a number of records in assessing a student's performance and progress; for example, classwork and homework; class assessments; examinations in school at Christmas or summer, mock exams and also coursework. They will not be simply passing on results from mock examinations or other tests. Junior Cycle results are not being used at an individual student level as a prediction of a student's likely performance in this year's Leaving Certificate.

The teacher's judgement will be based on evidence of learning and achievement such as that indicated above up until the point of school closure on the evening of 12 March. Teachers will not set additional assessments for the purposes of determining an estimated percentage mark.

In the case of coursework that has already been completed, a teacher's overall estimate should incorporate the mark they think that this coursework would have achieved if it had been marked in the usual way.

If a teacher has a real or perceived conflict of interest with a student in their class they must declare this to the school principal. There will be additional oversight by a nominated teacher and a deputy principal in such cases.

Where a student is studying one or more subjects outside of a recognised school, the Department will be flexible in accepting estimated marks and rankings from other schools or colleges, and will look at this issue on a case-by-case basis. In general, I can say that, provided an estimated mark and ranking can be generated from a teacher in a way that is fair to all candidates, my Department will seek to provide a calculated grade. Students will be able to use this calculated grade in the same way as a Leaving Certificate grade to satisfy minimum entry requirements.

When it was thought possible to hold written examinations but not orals or music performance tests, 100% marks were awarded for the cancelled orals and performance tests. Awarding 100% for orals and music performance tests in the calculated grade system would not be fair to students. Calculated grades are the best way of getting an accurate estimation of what a student would have achieved across all components of their examination.

Teachers of languages will assess the student's oral performance as well as their written skills to come to an estimated mark for each student. It was never intended to offer 100% for all practical or project work. Detailed guidance to assist teachers in formulating the estimated grade for each student will issue shortly and will address these components.

In the case of students who are entered to take their examinations through Irish, the teacher will base the estimate of the student's likely performance on the assumption that this bonus is

included in the estimate.

I am very conscious of the thousands of students who have applied to study in Northern Ireland, Britain, Europe and elsewhere. Contacts with the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland continue, as well as contacts with officials in the other devolved Governments in the UK. Departmental officials are engaging directly with UCAS to work through the key issues. I have also written to my counterparts across the European Union to explain the decision regarding the Leaving Certificate and to ask for as much flexibility as possible for students coming from Ireland to study in other Member States.

Schools Building Projects Status

375. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of a new building for a school (details supplied); the recent developments in this regard; and his plans to bring this project to fruition. [6831/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The major project for the construction of the new school building for the school referred to by the deputy is at an advanced stage of the tender process and my Department is currently awaiting the return of the supplementary tender report.

Subject to no issues arising, it is envisaged that construction should commence following the finalisation of the tender process with a contract duration of approximately 20 months.

The tender process for the provision of the second phase of the temporary accommodation on the existing school site has completed and the Letter of Acceptance has issued.

Question No. 376 answered with Question No. 309.

School Staff Appeals Mechanism

377. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the application by a school (details supplied) to the primary staffing appeals board. [6842/20]

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

The staffing schedule operates in a clear and transparent manner and treats all similar types of schools equally irrespective of location. The staffing schedule includes an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal under certain criteria to an independent Appeals Board.

The Primary Staffing Appeals Board considered a staffing appeal from the school referred to by the Deputy under the October 2019 Enrolments criteria. The Appeals Board has deemed the appeal ineligible and the school has been notified of this decision.

The Primary Staffing Appeals Board operates independently of the Department and its decision is final.

Questions - Written Answers
Special Educational Needs

378. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the action he will take to address the specific educational needs of children with a disability or learning difficulties, including a lack of access to technology and access to high speed broadband. [6856/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I recently announced that a special €10 million fund is being made available to support the purchase of technology and devices for disadvantaged students, including students with special educational needs.

This is additional to the latest round of funding for ICT under the Digital Strategy for Schools whereby €40m grant funding will be distributed in the coming weeks to eligible.

€10m additional funding is also now issuing to schools to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures, including children with special educational needs.

Many schools have also previously been sanctioned to purchase assistive technology equipment for pupils with special educational needs, under my Departments Assistive Technology scheme.

DES Circular 0010/2013, which sets out the basis for this scheme, notes that the equipment purchased should normally be kept in the school, however, the pupil or pupils for whom the equipment is sanctioned may, with the consent of the management authority, use the equipment at home.

Schools are encouraged to ensure that pupils are allowed to bring home and use assistive technology equipment sanctioned under this scheme, which is suitable for use at home (such as laptops and tablet devices) during the school closure period.

My Department has also provided a range of support and guidance for schools on how to provide for the continuing education for pupils over the current school closure period.

Supports are provided to schools and teachers engaged in distance learning and these are available at

<https://www.education.ie/en/covid-19/#14>

In addition to the general guidance that has been provided for schools, additional support material has also been provided specifically on how schools should provide for the continuity of education for children with special educational needs. This guidance is available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-pupils-with-sen-primary.pdf>

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-students-with-sen-post-primary.pdf>

The guidance notes that there is a particular need for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) to have regular, ongoing schooling. While all pupils need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, those with SEN are among those who need most support at this time. Examples of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of pupils with SEN are catered for, are provided in the guidance documents and a range of resources are also identified

for parents.

It sets out the role of schools and teachers in engaging with pupils with SEN and the role of teachers and school leaders to support such pupils. It advises schools as to how best to keep in touch with parents and guardians and how to keep pupils with SEN safe and engaged in the distance learning environment.

The guidance sets out the role of the special education teacher to support children with special educational needs at this time. It notes that the special education teacher's knowledge of their pupils' priority learning needs and agreed targets, as outlined in the pupil support file, will enable them to work with parents and guardians to choose appropriate supports in a remote learning environment.

Special Education Teachers (SETs) are asked to carefully examine how progress on the existing learning targets in student support plans can be reasonably extended by home learning. They are asked to use this knowledge to communicate with the pupils and their parents and guardians and to establish what methods will work best to achieve continuity of learning for the pupils.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is also providing a range of online resources for parents and teachers to support home learning for children with special educational needs during the Covid 19 restrictions.

In addition to the normal supports, the NCSE is providing online resources for children with Special Educational Needs who are at home as a result of the schools' closure.

Supports provided include those relating to general learning and difficulties for pupils with SEN, Curriculum support, speech language and communication, occupational therapy support, guidance around behaviour, and learning and resources on 'Visiting Teachers Support' for a teacher who teaches children with sensory impairment

Details of the full range of supports that the NCSE provides for teachers and parents is available at:

<https://ncse.ie/online-resources>

The Department of Education and Skills' NEPS psychologists have also developed advice and resources for young people to manage and stay well when schools are closed. The NEPS advice & resources for keeping children and young people well during Covid-19 are available at

<https://www.education.ie/covid19/wellbeing/>

Guidelines for continued provision of Guidance Counselling and resources available to support practice is available at <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Post-Primary-School-Policies/Policies/Guidance-Plan.html>

Guidance for parents of primary school pupils, which sets out what they should expect in relation to engagement in distance learning from schools, and how they can support their child in a home schooling environment is also available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/continuity-of-schooling/continuity-of-schooling.html>

While recognising the difficulty that school closure has had for parents and pupils, particularly in relation to pupils with special educational needs, my Department will continue to sup-

port and encourage schools to provide as much continuity of education as possible for such pupils, while continuing to engage with public health officials and stakeholders in relation to when schools may re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

Special Educational Needs

379. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when a special needs school place will be made available to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6872/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Ensuring that every child has a suitable school placement is a key objective of my Department. Significant resources are allocated each year to ensure that appropriate supports are available for children with special educational needs.

Since 2011, the number of special classes in mainstream schools has increased almost three-fold, from 548 to 1,618 for the 2019/2020 school year; with 1,353 of these catering for children with autism.

A list of special classes and special schools for the current school year is available on the NCSE website.

Budget 2020 provided for an additional 265 special class teachers in 2020, which will allow for the opening of additional classes where required.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide; has well established structures in place for engaging with schools and parents; and seeks to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all children who have been identified as needing special class placements.

The NCSE is planning a further expansion of special class and special school places nationally to meet identified need for next year. This process is ongoing.

It is open to any school to make an application to the NCSE for the establishment of a specialised provision and where sanctioned, a range of supports, including capital funding, is made available to the school. My Department works closely with the NCSE in this regard.

The NCSE's Local Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs) are available to assist and advise both schools and the parents of children with special educational needs. Parents may contact SENOs directly using the contact details available at:

<https://ncse.ie/regional-services-contact-list>

My Department understands that the NCSE are engaging with the parent of the child referred to by the deputy on the matter of an appropriate school placement. The SENO remains available to offer further advice and assistance, and I would encourage the parent to continue to engage directly with them, as required.

School Holidays

380. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will consider adjusting the traditional dates of the summer holidays, subject to public health advice, to allow

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schools come back in August 2020 in view of the impact being out of school poses to children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6884/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): On the 1st May 2020, the Taoiseach announced as part of the “Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business” that schools will commence opening on a phased basis at the beginning of the 2020/2021 academic year.

The Department is currently working with the Education Partners and relevant stakeholders in planning for this re-opening which will be based on public health advice. As part of this engagement, each of the education partners were given the opportunity to outline the key issues that they would like to have considered in the context of re-opening schools.

The issues raised by the education partners included those referred to by the Deputy in his question. These will now be worked through in detail as part of the development of the roadmap for reopening schools.

A core objective will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

Special Educational Needs

381. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when children with special needs will return to school subject to public health advice in view of the impact being out of school poses to such children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6885/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to advise the Deputy that decisions in relation to schools re-opening and operating will be underpinned by the ongoing advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and the Department of Health.

Engagement is underway with stakeholders in the education sector to develop contingency plans for the re-opening and operation of schools in an environment that may require social distancing and other public health requirements.

This work will be informed on the National Return to Work Safely Protocol as well as guidance and experience from other jurisdictions. A core objective of the contingency plans will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

The issues are also being considered by the Primary Education Forum which includes all stakeholders in the sector and it will also be addressed by the Advisory Group which involves representatives of stakeholders from the post-primary sector.

In the interim, my Department has provided a range of support and guidance for schools on how to provide for the continuing education for pupils over the current school closure period.

Supports are provided to schools and teachers engaged in distance learning and these are available at

<https://www.education.ie/en/covid-19/#14>

In addition to the general guidance that has been provided for schools, additional support material has also been provided specifically on how schools should provide for the continuity of education for children with special educational needs. This guidance is available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-pupils-with-sen-primary.pdf>

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-students-with-sen-post-primary.pdf>

The guidance notes that there is a particular need for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) to have regular, ongoing schooling. While all pupils need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, those with SEN are among those who need most support at this time. Examples of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of pupils with SEN are catered for, are provided in the guidance documents and a range of resources are also identified for parents.

It sets out the role of schools and teachers in engaging with pupils with SEN and the role of teachers and school leaders to support such pupils. It advises schools as to how best to keep in touch with parents and guardians and how to keep pupils with SEN safe and engaged in the distance learning environment.

The guidance sets out the role of the special education teacher to support children with special educational needs at this time. It notes that the special education teacher's knowledge of their pupils' priority learning needs and agreed targets, as outlined in the pupil support file, will enable them to work with parents and guardians to choose appropriate supports in a remote learning environment.

Special Education Teachers (SETs) are asked to carefully examine how progress on the existing learning targets in student support plans can be reasonably extended by home learning. They are asked to use this knowledge to communicate with the pupils and their parents and guardians and to establish what methods will work best to achieve continuity of learning for the pupils.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is also providing a range of online resources for parents and teachers to support home learning for children with special educational needs during the Covid 19 restrictions.

In addition to the normal supports, the NCSE is providing online resources for children with Special Educational Needs who are at home as a result of the schools' closure.

Supports provided include those relating to general learning and difficulties for pupils with SEN, Curriculum support, speech language and communication, occupational therapy support, guidance around behaviour, and learning and resources on 'Visiting Teachers Support' for a teacher who teaches children with sensory impairment

Details of the full range of supports that the NCSE provides for teachers and parents is available at:

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The Department of Education and Skills' NEPS psychologists have also developed advice and resources for young people to manage and stay well when schools are closed. The NEPS advice & resources for keeping children and young people well during Covid-19 are available at

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20 May 2020

Guidelines for continued provision of Guidance Counselling and resources available to support practice is available at

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Post-Primary-School-Policies/Policies/Guidance-Plan.html>

Guidance for parents of primary school pupils, which sets out what they should expect in relation to engagement in distance learning from schools, and how they can support their child in a home schooling environment is also available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/continuity-of-schooling/continuity-of-schooling.html>

I also recently announced that a special €10 million fund is being made available to support the purchase of technology and devices for disadvantaged students, including students with special educational needs.

This is additional to the latest round of funding for ICT under the Digital Strategy for Schools whereby €40m grant funding will be distributed in the coming weeks to eligible. €10m additional funding is also now issuing to schools to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

While recognising the difficulty that school closure has had for parents and pupils, particularly in relation to pupils with special educational needs, my Department will continue to support and encourage schools to provide as much continuity of education as possible for such pupils, while continuing to engage with public health officials and stakeholders in relation to when schools may re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

Covid-19 Pandemic

382. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will consider allowing the senior primary school classes return to their schools subject to public health advice prior to the summer holidays to allow children say goodbye to their schoolteachers and fellow classmates while adhering to public health advice; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6886/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I recognise that this is a particularly challenging time for all students across the education system, but particularly for those students who will be transferring from primary to post-primary school.

On the 1st May 2020, the Taoiseach announced as part of the “Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business” that schools will commence opening on a phased basis at the beginning of the 2020/2021 academic year.

The Department is currently working with the Education Partners and relevant stakeholders in planning for this re-opening which will be based on public health advice. As part of this engagement, each of the education partners were given the opportunity to outline the key issues that they would like to have considered in the context of re-opening schools.

The issues raised by the education partners included many of those referred to by the Deputy in his question. These will now be worked through in detail as part of the development of the roadmap for reopening schools.

A core objective will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can re-open and

operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

Schools Building Projects Status

383. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans for the completion of a school (details supplied); and when parents can expect the school to open. [6891/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I can inform the Deputy that this project has been devolved for delivery to Westmeath County Council (WCC).

The ‘Roadmap for the Reopening of Society and Business’ published by Government includes certain construction operations for inclusion in the first phase of economic activity which came into effect on May 18th 2020.

Subject to compliance with the ‘Return to Work Safely Protocol’, contractors may commence operations on site. The contractor must determine it is safe to commence working and be satisfied that it is in a position to meet the requirements of the Protocol and its contractual obligations.

Apart from the actual site shutdown of recent weeks, the impact on the construction programme of the project to which the deputy refers will only become more clear as the contractor recommences construction activity on site and adjusts to operating in the new environment.

The speed of completion of this particular project is also directly related to the level of resources employed on site and a continued high level of resources is essential for its timely completion. I can assure the Deputy that we are focussed on ensuring that all issues are progressed as quickly as possible while also ensuring that the quality and integrity of the project is fully protected.

School Equipment

384. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of applications for assisted technology grant in counties Longford and Westmeath; and the steps being taken to ensure there is no further delay in ensuring the equipment is in place before the re-opening of the schools. [6893/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department's assistive technology scheme provides grant-aid to schools to allow them to purchase specialist equipment which has been recommended by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) as essential for pupils with physical or communicative disabilities to access the school curriculum.

Applications are completed by schools and sent to the NCSE for recommendation and submission to my Department for processing.

My Department put arrangements in place with the NCSE to process existing applications received by email or post while the Covid 19 restrictions are in place.

As school buildings reopen for access by teachers my Department and the NCSE will extend these arrangements to new applications made by schools.

In 2020 to date my Department has received and processed 15 applications from schools in

Co. Westmeath and 5 from schools in Co. Longford. There are no unprocessed applications on hand from schools in either county.

School Accommodation Provision

385. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the extension to a school (details supplied) in the context of requirements of a child with special needs that is due to join the school; if the school will be given permission to proceed to tender stage and proceed as planned from there; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6905/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I can confirm to the Deputy that my Department has recently received a tender report from the school to which he refers. My Department will be in contact with the school directly once its review of this report has been completed.

Schools Property

386. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of a school building (details supplied) which has been empty since the opening of another school; his plans for the development of the school; the nature of the plans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6906/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The property referred to by the Deputy is not in my ownership.

When State monies are provided to facilitate building works to school property owned by a third party, a legal mechanism is put in place in order to protect the State's interest. This is known as a Charging Lease or Declaration of Trust. These leases protect the Minister's capital investment in the school property and require that the property be used as a school for a set period.

I can confirm that as I am not party to a charging lease or a Declaration of Trust on the property referred to by the Deputy I do not have a vested interest in the property.

I would advise that any enquiry regarding the future use of the building should be made to the landowner in the first instance.

Schools Property

387. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of a school building (details supplied) which has been empty since the opening of another school; his plans for the development of the school; the nature of the plans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6907/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): When a school building becomes vacant as a result of closure/amalgamation/replacement, the future use of the old building is in the first instance a matter for the property owner. When the property owner applies to the Minister for permission to either use the property for community purposes or to sell it, my Department makes an assessment as to whether the property is required for future educational

use. If it is concluded that the property has no viable future educational use, my

Department permits that it may be used for community or other purposes or may be sold.

I wish to advise the Deputy that the former school that he refers to operates under ERST – the Trustee body responsible for schools formally under the Trusteeship of Christian Brothers.

The Department has no lien on this building, therefore the future use of the building for educational purposes will be contingent on the Terms and Conditions of the Trust and the willingness of the Trust to Lease/Sell the premises to the Minister. In general Trusts are prohibited from disposing of properties for less than market values.

Question No. 388 answered with Question No. 228.

Question No. 389 answered with Question No. 265.

State Examinations

390. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the mechanisms that will be put in place to protect teachers, principals and schools from lobbying and canvassing by parents and students regarding potential exam grades due to the change in the leaving certificate for 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6910/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): At the core of both the school-based and national standardisation phases of the system of calculated grades is a commitment to objectivity and fairness. To ensure this, the school-based process must not be compromised.

Therefore, the principal, deputy principal(s), teachers or other members of the school staff must not under any circumstances discuss with any student or with the parents or guardians of any student the estimated marks that the school is submitting.

Any attempt to influence teachers in relation to the process of Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades is considered to be entirely inappropriate and will be regarded as canvassing.

Detailed guidance for teachers and principals in this matter is being finalised by my Department.

Question No. 391 answered with Question No. 159.

Covid-19 Pandemic

392. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the consideration he has given to the re-opening of schools in September 2020; if he has given consideration to the earlier opening of schools to facilitate children with autism whose routines have been disproportionately affected by the long-term closure of schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6912/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to advise the Deputy that decisions in relation to schools re-opening and operating will be underpinned by the ongoing advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) and the Department of Health.

Engagement is underway with stakeholders in the education sector to develop contingency

plans for the re-opening and operation of schools, including schools for children with Autism, in an environment that may require social distancing and other public health requirements.

This work will be informed by the National Return to Work Safely Protocol as well as guidance and experience from other jurisdictions. A core objective of the contingency plans will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

The issues are also being considered by the Primary Education Forum which includes all stakeholders in the sector and it will also be addressed by the Advisory Group which involves representatives of stakeholders from the post-primary sector.

In the interim, my Department has provided a range of support and guidance for schools on how to provide for the continuing education for pupils over the current school closure period.

Supports are provided to schools and teachers engaged in distance learning and these are available at

<https://www.education.ie/en/covid-19/#14>.

In addition to the general guidance that has been provided for schools, additional support material has also been provided specifically on how schools should provide for the continuity of education for children with special educational needs. This guidance is available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-pupils-with-sen-primary.pdf>

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The guidance notes that there is a particular need for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) to have regular, ongoing schooling. While all pupils need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, those with SEN are among those who need most support at this time. Examples of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of pupils with SEN are catered for, are provided in the guidance documents and a range of resources are also identified for parents.

It sets out the role of schools and teachers in engaging with pupils with SEN and the role of teachers and school leaders to support such pupils. It advises schools as to how best to keep in touch with parents and guardians and how to keep pupils with SEN safe and engaged in the distance learning environment.

The guidance sets out the role of the special education teacher to support children with special educational needs at this time. It notes that the special education teacher's knowledge of their pupils' priority learning needs and agreed targets, as outlined in the pupil support file, will enable them to work with parents and guardians to choose appropriate supports in a remote learning environment.

Special Education Teachers (SETs) are asked to carefully examine how progress on the existing learning targets in student support plans can be reasonably extended by home learning. They are asked to use this knowledge to communicate with the pupils and their parents and guardians and to establish what methods will work best to achieve continuity of learning for the pupils.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is also providing a range of online resources for parents and teachers to support home learning for children with special educational needs during the Covid 19 restrictions.

In addition to the normal supports, the NCSE is providing online resources for children with Special Educational Needs who are at home as a result of the schools' closure.

Supports provided include those relating to general learning and difficulties for pupils with SEN, Curriculum support, speech language and communication, occupational therapy support, guidance around behaviour, and learning and resources on 'Visiting Teachers Support' for a teacher who teaches children with sensory impairment

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Guidelines for continued provision of Guidance Counselling and resources available to support practice is available at

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Post-Primary-School-Policies/Policies/Guidance-Plan.html>

Guidance for parents of primary school pupils, which sets out what they should expect in relation to engagement in distance learning from schools, and how they can support their child in a home schooling environment is also available at:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/continuity-of-schooling/continuity-of-schooling.html>

I also recently announced that a special €10 million fund is being made available to support the purchase of technology and devices for disadvantaged students, including students with special educational needs.

This is additional to the latest round of funding for ICT under the Digital Strategy for Schools whereby €40m grant funding will be distributed in the coming weeks to eligible. €10m additional funding is also now issuing to schools to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

While recognising the difficulty that school closure has had for parents and pupils, particularly in relation to pupils with special educational needs, my Department will continue to support and encourage schools to provide as much continuity of education as possible for such pupils, while continuing to engage with public health officials and stakeholders in relation to when schools may re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

Special Educational Needs

393. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the mechanisms that will be put in place to accommodate families who would normally have access to the July provision for primary school students with special needs; if there is an alternative plan should it not be able to proceed in July 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6913/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am committed to running a summer Provision type programme for children with complex needs this year as soon as it is safe to do so and in accordance with public health advice.

My Department is exploring a number of options for a summer education programme for children with complex special needs.

The primary aim of the proposed programme would be to limit potential regression in learning thereby ensuring in so far as possible that these children can reintegrate and transition into their planned education setting for next year with their peers.

This may be done through a targeted level of supports to address regression of social skills and re-establish tolerance of routines paving the way for reintegrating full time into education when schools reopen in the autumn.

Question No. 394 answered with Question No. 338.

State Examinations

395. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on whether the entire 2020 cohort of leaving certificate students should be entitled to resit the exam at any stage in their lives at no cost, including the cost of tuition through further education and so on in recognition of the disruption to the tuition of the school year. [6923/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Every effort was made to run the 2020 Leaving Certificate as close as possible to the way the examinations were originally intended to be held. However, based on medical advice and other assessments, that the Leaving Certificate examinations cannot be held in a reliable and valid manner, nor in a way that would be equitable for students.

All students will be given the option to receive a State Certificate of Calculated Grades in each subject. It will have the same status as Leaving Certificates awarded to students in previous years.

Students will also have the opportunity to sit the Leaving Certificate examination if they wish at the earliest safe and practical time. The examination fee will be waived in this case.

Students who opt to sit the Leaving Certificate examinations at a later stage and who receive an improved CAO offer on foot of these results will also receive a deferred college offer to start their course in the 2021/22 academic year. If a candidate who has started first year of a course becomes entitled to a higher CAO offer and chooses to accept same in the following academic year, attendance for the first year on the new course would remain eligible for free fees and SUSI funding as appropriate.

Health Professions Admission Test

396. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the date for the release of the health professions admission test, HPAT, results for 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6924/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The HPAT is independently administered by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) on behalf of the universities' medical schools and the RCSI. The selection criteria and process for admission to medical schools is a matter for those institutions in line with their statutory autonomy in relation to academic affairs. Neither I nor my Department has a function in the administration of the HPAT, including the issuing of results.

Covid-19 Pandemic

397. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he has considered the need for the wearing of face coverings in schools and colleges by staff and or learners; the advice he has received; the minutes of meetings in which this has been discussed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6942/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): On the 1st May 2020, the Taoiseach announced as part of the "Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business" that schools will commence opening on a phased basis at the beginning of the 2020/2021 academic year.

The Department is currently working with the Education Partners and relevant stakeholders in planning for this re-opening which will be based on public health advice. As part of this engagement, each of the education partners were given the opportunity to outline the key issues that they would like to have considered in the context of re-opening schools.

The issues raised by the education partners included many of those referred to by the Deputy in her question. These will now be worked through in detail as part of the development of the roadmap for reopening schools.

A core objective will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

Cycle to Work Scheme

398. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will publish the advice he received that lead to the cancellation of the cycle to work scheme for teachers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6943/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): It was necessary for operational reasons to temporarily suspend the cycle to work scheme arising from the COVID 19 lockdown.

The priority of my Department during the lockdown period has been to ensure that the 125,000 payees on the payrolls continued to be paid on a fortnightly basis.

I am glad to advise the Deputy that my Department will accept new applications for the Cycle to Work scheme from the 8th June 2020. The information on my Department's website has been updated to reflect this.

Special Educational Needs

399. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the structures he is putting in place to protect children and providers to ensure that the July provision goes ahead this summer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6944/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am committed to running a summer Provision type programme for children with complex needs this year as soon as it is safe to do so and in accordance with public health advice.

My Department is exploring a number of options for a summer education programme for children with complex special needs.

The primary aim of the proposed programme would be to limit potential regression in learning thereby ensuring in so far as possible that these children can reintegrate and transition into their planned education setting for next year with their peers.

This may be done through a targeted level of supports to address regression of social skills and re-establish tolerance of routines paving the way for reintegrating full time into education when schools reopen in the autumn.

English Language Training Organisations

400. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to the fact that some English language schools are refusing to refund students for cancelled courses and are instead trying to offer online classes or vouchers for classes for 2021, measures which do not suit the majority of those affected; if the matter will be investigated; and his plans to ensure that all students that request a refund are provided one. [6947/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am aware that issues have been raised in relation to refunds for students in the English language education (ELE) sector. These issues have been discussed at the ELE Covid-19 Working Group chaired by my Department.

In compliance with the Government Decision taken in March 2020, all English language education (ELE) providers closed their premises in accordance with public health advice as part of efforts to combat the spread of the Covid-19 outbreak.

Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, English language education providers have introduced new ways of providing services to their students including facilitating the provision of online classes. This reflects a similar approach that has been adopted by providers across the wider education system. If a student is having issues with the programme on offer or in accessing a provider's services, they can engage with their provider to address these issues.

It is not within the remit of my Department to pursue providers for refunds arising from fees paid by students. This is a matter between the student and their provider. However, as part of the conditions for a provider to have its programmes included on the Interim List for Eligible Programmes (ILEP) and therefore be eligible to recruit International Students, it must have established policies and procedures for the refund of fees to students in addition to a complaints procedure in the event of student complaints. These should be communicated to the student at time of enrolment. If the student exhausts the internal complaints procedure of the provider and is still unhappy about the outcome, they can make a complaint to the Immigration Delivery Service of the Department of Justice and Equality. However, in the case of a complaint regard-

ing refunds, this can only relate to whether a provider has followed their internal refunds policy. If the provider's refund policy was followed, there can be no further intervention into a private agreement between a provider and their student.

School Staff

401. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will reconsider the decision not to provide an extra sixth class teacher to a school (details supplied) in view of existing overcrowding issues, lack of space and the need for extra teacher supports under Covid-19 health and safety measures for when pupils return to school in September 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6948/20]

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

The staffing schedule operates in a clear and transparent manner and treats all similar types of schools equally irrespective of location. The staffing schedule includes an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal under certain criteria to an independent Appeals Board.

The school referred to by the Deputy initially submitted an appeal to the Primary Staffing Appeals Board which was deemed ineligible. After that decision was issued, the school provided a new appeal due to a change in circumstances in the school. The Primary Staffing Appeals Board has provisionally upheld the appeal, subject to September 2020 enrolments. The school has been notified in this regard.

Home Tuition Scheme

402. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when home tuition grant based preschools will reopen; if he will consider re-opening them as soon as possible in view of the small class size and the impact that social and educational isolation is currently having on children with special needs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6949/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to advise the Deputy that decisions in relation to schools re-opening and operating will be underpinned by the ongoing advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and the Department of Health.

Engagement is underway with stakeholders in the education sector to develop contingency plans for the re-opening and operation of schools, including schools for children with Autism, in an environment that may require social distancing and other public health requirements.

This work will be informed by the National Return to Work Safely Protocol as well as guidance and experience from other jurisdictions. A core objective of the contingency plans will be to ensure that schools and other education settings can re-open and operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice.

In relation to the reopening of early learning and care and school-age childcare services my colleague, Dr. Katherine Zappone, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, has established an

Advisory Group on Reopening Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare services.

Amongst other roles, the Group will be developing guidelines to support providers, their staff, parents and children return to familiar, albeit different, environments, in a phased manner over the coming months.

As the first step to prepare to re-open childcare services, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) is encouraging service providers to review the Return to Work Safely Protocol, published by Government this week, but to be aware that assistance will be made available to them in the coming weeks to meet its requirements.

Various childcare specific guidance cleared by Public Health experts will be issued to services by DCYA over the coming weeks. DCYA is also planning an opportunity for public consultation.

In the interim, funding for the provision of Home Tuition services will continue to be provided where tuition is delivered by distance learning.

Question No. 403 answered with Question No. 201.

Question No. 404 answered with Question No. 247.

Special Educational Needs

405. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the July provision will be going ahead in 2020; and if so, the timeframe and manner for same in order to provide clarity to students, parents and teachers that are due to take part in the scheme. [7004/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I am committed to running a summer Provision type programme for children with complex needs this year as soon as it is safe to do so and in accordance with public health advice.

My Department is exploring a number of options for a summer education programme for children with complex special needs.

The primary aim of the proposed programme would be to limit potential regression in learning thereby ensuring in so far as possible that these children can reintegrate and transition into their planned education setting for next year with their peers.

This may be done through a targeted level of supports to address regression of social skills and re-establish tolerance of routines paving the way for reintegrating full time into education when schools reopen in the autumn.

Question No. 406 answered with Question No. 275.

Departmental Contracts

407. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the amount spent on external consultants by his Department in 2019; the average hourly rate; if caps or limits on such spending are in place; the way in which conflicts of interest are managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7279/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department complies with

the Department of Finance's guidelines for engagements of consultants by the civil service, having regard to public procurement guidelines, which include a requirement for the provision of a declaration on conflict of interest.

Contracts are awarded based on the most economically advantageous tender.

The data in respect of 2019 is available on my Department's website at

<https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Financial-Reports/Expenditure-on-Consultancy/expenditure-on-consultancy-by-DES-in-2019.pdf>

Maternity Leave

408. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if extended maternity leave will be granted to mothers due to go back to work during the Covid-19 lockdown; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5717/20]

409. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if his attention has been drawn to plans to extend maternity benefit due to complications in securing childcare due to Covid-19. [5725/20]

410. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if consideration is being given to extend paid maternity leave due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5737/20]

411. **Deputy Darragh O'Brien** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if consideration has been given to extending paid maternity leave due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5752/20]

412. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he will extend maternity leave and maternity benefit by three months from the end of the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions for all persons currently claiming same or those that become eligible for maternity leave and benefit before the lifting of the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5754/20]

413. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he will consider extending paid maternity leave for an additional three months as a result of the Covid-19 crisis (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5911/20]

415. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his plans to extend maternity leave as per a request by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6053/20]

416. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his plans to extend maternity leave for those currently availing of same in view of Covid-19 restrictions regarding childcare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6106/20]

417. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he will consider extending maternity leave and or maternity benefit by three months in response to the closure of childcare facilities as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic in view of the fact that many parents are facing job losses if they have to return to work with no available childcare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6222/20]

418. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if a reply will is-

sue to correspondence from a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6226/20]

421. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if the potential to extend maternity leave and benefit for those that lost the benefit during the Covid-19 pandemic will be examined. [6269/20]

423. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he is considering plans to extend paid maternity leave during the current Covid-19 crisis; and if not, if he will consider such an extension (details supplied). [6489/20]

425. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he has made provisions for an extension to maternity leave for mothers that are due to return to work after maternity leave but that may be unable to do so due to a lack of appropriate childcare or concerns regarding health and safety in relation to their baby due to the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6916/20]

426. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if maternity benefit will be extended for those that have had children born between January and March 2020 by three months in the interest of the healthy development of the children that have spent their first months amidst the Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7013/20]

445. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his plans to extend the period of allowed unpaid maternity leave to new mothers that are currently off work and are now on leave due to Covid-19. [6129/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 408 to 413, inclusive, 415 to 418, inclusive, 421, 423, 425, 426 and 445 together.

I am conscious of demands on parents at this time and hope that the additional measures to support working parents that I have introduced in recent years, including the new parent's leave scheme and an extension of parental leave, are helping to ease some of these demands. These matters are being examined by Government.

As the law now stands, a mother is entitled to this leave irrespective of the duration of her current employment. The mother can take maternity leave from casual or part-time employment. She can take up to 26 weeks of paid maternity leave, and up to a further 16 weeks of unpaid leave. Two weeks must be taken before the baby is due, and at least four weeks must be taken after the birth. As Minister of State for Justice and Equality, the legislation that governs the provision of maternity leave is my responsibility. The provision of maternity benefit is under the remit of the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

In addition to maternity leave, each parent may also avail of two weeks of parent's leave during the first year of a child's life and may qualify for parent's benefit during this period.

Parental leave is also available which entitles parents to take unpaid leave from work to spend time looking after their children. Parents can take up to 22 weeks of parental leave for each eligible child before their 12th birthday.

Disability Activation Projects

414. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the supports or grants available to small business owners with disabilities whose specific needs dictate they need to employ persons to enable them to carry out their work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5980/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Deputy will be aware that the Department of Justice and Equality has a co-ordination role in relation to disability issues. In this regard, it oversees the implementation of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy (NDIS) 2017 – 2021 and the Comprehensive Employment Strategy (CES) 2015 - 2024.

The NDIS is the key framework for policy and action to address the needs of people with disabilities while the CES sets out a ten-year approach to ensuring that people with disabilities who are able to, and want to work, are supported and enabled to do so. The CES Implementation Group, which monitors the implementation of the Strategy, has an independent chair, Mr. Fergus Finlay, and is co-ordinated by the Department of Justice and Equality.

The second Action Plan (2019 – 2021) for the CES, published in December 2019, provides a focus for the work of the Implementation Group for the next period in the lifetime of the Strategy and sets clear deliverables and milestones for each action so that implementation can be monitored by the Implementation Group. The Government regards the new plan as a vital building block in the overall implementation of the Strategy.

Accessing and staying in employment for people with disabilities is difficult but can be achieved with appropriate supports. It requires many Government services to work for that individual and importantly to work together to provide a joined-up service. If the Action Plan can make improvements in the area of employment it can lead to improvements across all areas.

The Department does not provide grants to businesses but the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection does offer a number of workplace supports schemes for people with disabilities and their employers or prospective employers, including the Reasonable Accommodation Fund (which offers a workplace equipment/adaptation grant, an employee retention grant and a personal reader grant) and the Wage Subsidy Scheme.

More information is available at this link: https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/employment_and_disability/

Questions Nos. 415 to 418, inclusive, answered with Question No. 408.

Covid-19 Pandemic

419. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the steps that have been taken at EU level to protect migrants and asylum seekers from an outbreak of Covid-19, including those living in overcrowded reception centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6264/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): As the Deputy will appreciate, it is the responsibility of each individual Member State of the EU to address the challenges in their own state regarding the impacts of Covid-19 on persons resident in their state, including applicants for International Protection and other migrants.

In order to support Member States and to help protect migrants and asylum seekers during the Covid-19 pandemic, the European Commission has prepared a formal guidance document called ‘Guidance on the implementation of relevant EU provisions in the area of asylum and

return procedures and on resettlement” with the support of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex). This was formally adopted by Member States on 16 April 2020 and it illustrates how to ensure continuity of procedures as much as possible while fully ensuring the protection of people’s health, given the healthcare measures introduced by Member States.

The Commission advices are that in order to prevent and contain the spread of Covid-19, public health measures such as medical screening, social distancing, quarantine and isolation should be applied as necessary for third-country nationals, including applicants for international protection, resettled persons or third-country nationals illegally staying in the Union provided that these measures are reasonable, proportionate and non-discriminatory.

In line with the EU Commission guidance I can assure the Deputy that my Department continues to follow HSE and Public Health guidelines in relation to measures taken to prevent the spread of Covid-19 within our Direct Provision accommodation system and our international protection system generally. We will continue to follow the Commission’s guidance as regards asylum measures in the context of the pandemic as appropriate to Ireland. For example, Ireland continues to accept new asylum applications as normal as per the EU advices.

As regards our Direct Provision system, together with the HSE, we have put in place a range of measures in all of the Department’s Accommodation Centres to address any cases of Covid-19 if or when they arise. This includes provision for self-isolation facilities in Centres and a number of offsite self-isolation centres around the State. In all matters related to the Covid-19 pandemic, we work collaboratively with the HSE to implement their public health advice.

We are carefully following the guidelines for our centres that have been published by the HSE’s Health Protection Surveillance Centre. These are publicly available at: <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/vulnerablegroupsguidance/COVID-19-Guidance-for-vulnerable-groups-settings.pdf>.

That guidance exists precisely because it is recognised that congregated settings such as Direct Provision centres present specific challenges in this pandemic.

In partnership with the HSE and Safetynet, my Department has put in place a national clinical telephone service to provide public health advice to support centre staff. It is also being used to advise, support and work with locations where vulnerable groups are present relating to the implementation of COVID-19 guidelines and measures.

The established procedure across all centres where a person is suspected of having the virus or is confirmed as having the virus, is that, where advised by Public Health, they are moved to a dedicated offsite self-isolation facility. Supports are available for the duration of their period of isolation until such time as the HSE considers that they can safely return to their centre. We have opened four dedicated self-isolation facilities (with capacity for 299 people) in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Dundalk. Residents in these facilities have their own bedroom and their own bathroom.

Since the start of the year over 1,550 permanent and temporary Direct Provision bed spaces have been procured, including the dedicated new centres opened in Rosslare Harbour, Caheriveen and Tullamore.

We have relocated over 600 residents to support social and physical distancing in centres and cocooning measures for the most vulnerable. By doing this, we have ensured that no more than three single people are sharing a room in any centre. We intend to continue this policy when the crisis is over.

The vast majority of the rooms in the new accommodation being used to support social and physical distancing are twin rooms accommodating two people. If any person is being accommodated in these locations based on an identified vulnerability (age or medical condition), they have their own bedroom and their own bathroom to facilitate their cocooning.

We have cocooned all residents over the age of 65 and anyone advised to the Department as having a serious medical illness.

In addition to the formal guidance provided by the EU Commission, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), will continue to assess how the Covid-19 pandemic affects asylum services within Member States. The EASO will provide support and advice as necessary to all Member States (including Ireland) including the ongoing provision of training and professional development through their Training and Professional Development Centre.

The European Communities (Reception Conditions) Regulations 2018 transposed the EU Reception Conditions Directive into Irish law. Under the whole-of-Government approach, a number of Government Departments and agencies work closely together to ensure the necessary supports and services are provided to our residents. You can be assured, in these unprecedented times, that my Department will, in conjunction with all other responsible Departments and Agencies, continue to provide such services to the best of our abilities in line with the provisions of the Directive.

Crime Prevention

420. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his plans to fulfil the public commitment made on 17 January 2020 to establish a taskforce in Drogheda, County Louth in the wake of the killing of a person (details supplied); and the details of progress made on the establishment of such a taskforce. [6267/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): As the Deputy will be aware, both the Taoiseach and I have visited Drogheda on a number of occasions to meet with Gardaí involved in tackling the ongoing and highly volatile feud as referred to. I have also been regularly briefed by the Commissioner on the matter.

I can assure the Deputy that Gardaí are dedicated to tackling gang-related violence in Drogheda and ensuring the safety of all citizens in the community and the wider area. There is a dedicated policing operation in place, Operation Stratus, which specifically targets the ongoing feud. This includes high visibility patrols and checkpoints, days of action and covert policing initiatives targeting specific individuals.

In addition, Garda resources in the region have been increased significantly. I understand from the Garda authorities that there are 158 Gardaí assigned to the Drogheda District at the end of April 2020, representing a 49% increase compared to the end of 2015. There are now also 19 Garda staff, an increase of 73% in the same time period. Taken together, this increase in the Garda workforce represents a very significant increase in operational policing hours in Drogheda. In addition, these are supported and supplemented by personnel from the Regional Armed Support Unit, Divisional Detective, Drugs and Crime Units as well as Divisional Roads Policing Units as required. Liaison is ongoing with relevant stakeholders, including the Local Authorities, Tusla and the HSE.

I further note that a key principle arising from the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing is that policing is not the responsibility of the police alone, but also involves other agencies of Government, such as health or social services, as well as other sectors of society.

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This principle is at the centre of a new policy on community safety which is being developed in my Department. The policy, which will be given a statutory basis in the new Policing and Community Safety Bill, proposes to establish and support a system of community safety at local level across the country. Through cross-sectoral collaboration, and by drawing on the available services, these systems will be best placed to identify, support and implement, community safety according to the needs of the local community.

In the meantime, officials in my Department are examining how the community in Drogheda can be better supported in the more immediate future including through engagement with the local authority who I know have been very active in delivering on actions to support local communities affected by the increase in violence. If it would be of assistance, officials in my Department are available to meet with the Deputy to further discuss the situation in Drogheda and the possible responses and, if you agree, I can have that meeting arranged. The further advancement of the specific commitment referred to by the Deputy is a matter for the next Government.

Finally I can reassure the Deputy that my Department and An Garda Síochána keep all criminal legislation under continuous review and that unprecedented resources are being provided to An Garda Síochána to help them address the challenge of gangland activities and other forms of criminality in the State - the Garda budget for 2020 amounts to €1.88 billion.

Question No. 421 answered with Question No. 408.

Covid-19 Pandemic

422. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the nationalities which refused to give details of the locations they would quarantine for the 14 day period as reported recently at airports here. [6339/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I can inform the Deputy that Border Management Unit Immigration Officers at Dublin Airport, on behalf of the Health Authorities, commenced recording Passenger Locator Forms on 28 April 2020.

The table below provides the nationalities of individuals who refused to complete a Passenger Locator Form when entering the State at Dublin Airport between 30 April 2020 and 13 May 2020.

Between 30 April 2020 and 13 May 2020, a total of 55 passengers refused to complete the form, 20 of whom were in transit to locations outside the State. This represents less than 1 per cent of all incoming passengers in that period.

[Table - Nationalities]

Question No. 423 answered with Question No. 408.

Covid-19 Pandemic

424. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of persons contacted within 14 days following their arrival in Ireland as part of the public health passenger checks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6710/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Immigration Service

(Border Management Unit) of my Department is currently collecting this public health data on behalf of the HSE, for as long as inward passenger numbers remain at historic lows. Since 28 April 2020, I can confirm for the Deputy that a total of 4,780 persons were contacted within 14 days following their arrival in the State by officials of my Department. These contacts were made as part of public health passenger checks under measures related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Two calls are made to passengers following their arrival into the State, providing a Public Health Passenger Locator Form is completed. The calls are to confirm that the passenger is still residing at the address they provided on the form and to confirm if the passenger is self-isolating.

Passengers are required to self-isolate for 14 days after they arrive into the State, and this includes Irish Residents.

The first call is made 2 days after the person's arrival in the State. The second call is made 12 days after their arrival and where the person has indicated that their stay in Ireland would be for more than 12 days.

The table below sets out the number of calls made based on each arrival location and the time period when the calls were made.

Location	Date Range	Number of 1st Calls
Dublin Airport	28/04/2020 – 14/05/2020	2,830
Dublin Port	28/04/2020 – 14/05/2020	600
Rosslare Port	01/05/2020 – 13/05/2020	165
Cork Airport	29/04/2020 – 11/05/2020	159
Total 1st Calls		3,754

2nd Calls are made to passengers 12 days after their arrival into the state (where a call is required i.e. they indicated their duration here is more than 12 days)

Location	Date Range	Number of 2nd Calls
Dublin Airport	28/04/2020 – 04/05/2020	1,026
Total 2nd Calls		1,026

Therefore, the total calls made since 28 April 2020, is 4,780.

Questions Nos. 425 and 426 answered with Question No. 408.

Departmental Contracts

427. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if his Department has engaged the use of external consultants from 1 January 2020 to date; the details and costs of such engagements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5534/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I wish to advise the Deputy that the information sought cannot be provided in the time allowed. As soon as the information has been collated I will write to the Deputy on the matter.

Garda Disciplinary Proceedings

428. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number and rank of members of An Garda Síochána that are suspended from duty by Garda division; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5571/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Garda Commissioner is responsible for carrying on and managing and controlling generally the administration and business of An Garda Síochána including personnel/human resources and operational matters. Moreover, disciplinary matters within An Garda Síochána are governed by the Garda Síochána Act 2005 and the Garda Síochána (Discipline) Regulations 2007 and are a matter for the Garda Commissioner and not for me as Minister.

In the circumstances, it would not be appropriate for me to comment in detail on internal Garda disciplinary matters.

I have been advised by the Garda authorities that as of 8 May 2020, a total of 46 members of An Garda Síochána were suspended from duty. This consists of 0.3% of the Garda workforce including sworn Garda members and reserve gardaí. It would not be appropriate to provide a breakdown by Garda Division as, given the low numbers involved, there is a risk that individuals might be identifiable.

The following table, furnished to me by the Garda authorities, details the number of members by rank who are suspended from duty, as of 8 May 2020:

Rank	Number Suspended
Sergeant & Above	6
Garda	38
Reserve Garda	2
Total	46

More generally, and as the Deputy may know, a review of Garda disciplinary arrangements, including the complaints process, is in line with the recommendations of the report on the Commission on the Future of Policing. An action in relation to revision of the discipline system is included in “A Policing Service for the Future”, the implementation plan for that report. A Discipline Review Steering Committee has been set up to oversee the process.

Garda Disciplinary Proceedings

429. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number and rank of members of An Garda Síochána that are suspended from duty and are also subject to an internal disciplinary process by Garda division; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5572/20]

430. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number and rank of members of An Garda Síochána that are the subject of an internal disciplinary process by Garda division; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5573/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 429 and 430 together.

The Garda Commissioner is responsible for carrying on and managing and controlling generally the administration and business of An Garda Síochána including personnel/human re-

sources and operational matters. Moreover, disciplinary matters within An Garda Síochána are governed by the Garda Síochána Act 2005 and the Garda Síochána (Discipline) Regulations 2007 and are a matter for the Garda Commissioner and not for me as Minister.

I have requested a report from the Commissioner in relation to the matter referred to by the Deputy and I will write to him directly when I receive it.

Direct Provision System

431. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of a centre (details supplied) under the aegis of his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5574/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): I want to assure the Deputy that my Department is doing everything it can to protect the health and welfare of residents and staff in our accommodation centres, as well as that of the wider community. My Department is working closely with the HSE in doing so, and while the HSE advice has evolved over time, we have been assured by both it and the Office of the Chief Medical Officer that our approach is appropriate.

All centres, including the Temple Accommodation Centre, are following the guidelines for our centres that have been published by the HSE's Health Protection Surveillance Centre. These are publicly available at its website www.hpsc.ie.

That guidance exists precisely because it is recognised that congregated settings such as Direct Provision centres present specific challenges in this pandemic.

The Temple Accommodation Centre currently has 54 residents onsite, which is well below its contracted capacity of 125 residents. This reduced capacity is supporting residents to observe social and physical distancing at this time.

Any resident in the centre who has tested positive or is identified as a close contact through the HSE's contact tracing system, has been moved to a dedicated offsite self-isolation facility. There, supports are available for the duration of their period of isolation until such time as the HSE considers that they can safely return to the centre. We have opened four dedicated self-isolation facilities (with capacity for 299 people) in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Dundalk. Residents in these facilities have their own bedroom and their own bathroom.

While there are three on-site self-isolation rooms in the Temple Accommodation Centre, I can inform the Deputy that there are no residents self-isolating or cocooning on-site at this time.

Specific arrangements have been put in place in the Temple Accommodation Centre to support social and physical distancing when using the laundry room or the communal kitchen. No more than two people are allowed to use the laundry room at the same time and a rota system has been put in place in the shared kitchen with a limit on the number of persons allowed in the kitchen. All residents have been advised of these measures and there is adequate signage advising of same. Meals are delivered to any person self-isolating or cocooning onsite, however, as I have advised the Deputy, there are no such persons presently in the Temple Accommodation Centre.

During this time, centre managers have also been advised to increase the standard and frequency of cleaning throughout the centres, paying particular attention to communal areas. A regular supply of hand sanitiser for all centres is in place and this is distributed to centres as

needed. Other Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is distributed as needed and in line with HPSC guidelines on its appropriate use in residential settings. In addition to the regular supplies of hand sanitiser, the Temple Accommodation Centre has also received 1,400 face masks, 1,000 medical aprons and 1,000 pairs of latex gloves. These items were distributed to the centre on 21 April 2020.

We have approximately 7,700 residents living in our accommodation centres, of whom approximately 1,500 residents are living in own-door accommodation. While all own door accommodation is fully utilised at this time, it is our practice to prioritise families for such accommodation when it becomes available.

Citizenship Status

432. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of persons that had their citizenship and or naturalisation revoked and the reasons for same in each year since 2010; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5575/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I can advise the Deputy that the legal basis for revocation of citizenship is set-out in section 19 (1) of the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956, as amended, which provides that the Minister may revoke a certificate of naturalisation if he is satisfied—

(a) that the issue of the certificate was procured by fraud, misrepresentation whether innocent or fraudulent, or concealment of material facts or circumstances, or

(b) that the person to whom it was granted has, by any overt act, shown himself to have failed in his duty of fidelity to the nation and loyalty to the State, or

(c) that (except in the case of a certificate of naturalisation which is issued to a person of Irish descent or associations) the person to whom it is granted has been ordinarily resident outside the State or, in the case of an application for a certificate of naturalisation granted under section 15A, resident outside the island of Ireland (otherwise than in the public service) for a continuous period of seven years and without reasonable excuse has not during that period registered annually in the prescribed manner his name and a declaration of his intention to retain Irish citizenship with an Irish diplomatic mission or consular office or with the Minister, or

(d) that the person to whom it is granted is also, under the law of a country at war with the State, a citizen of that country, or

(e) that the person to whom it is granted has by any voluntary act, other than marriage or entry into a civil partnership, acquired another citizenship.

For the period referred to by the Deputy, a total of five revocations have taken place arising from voluntary revocation or information coming to light regarding identity.

A Committee of Enquiry into Revocations has been established to consider individual cases under the Act and make recommendations to me for final decision.

There have been seven hearings by the Committee of Enquiry into Revocations and seven reports issued for eight applicants since the initial formation of the committee in 2014 and the first hearing in December 2018.

433. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if guidance will be provided on the operation of a court order during the Covid-19 outbreak (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5576/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I appreciate the concerns that the public health emergency is causing for many families in relation to court orders for matters such as access, maintenance and guardianship.

The Deputy will appreciate that setting the terms of court orders and related proceedings are matters proper to the judiciary. Neither I nor my department are involved in such matters.

I believe it is important to point out that court orders in relation to access remain in place. Everyone should understand that the restrictions brought in to tackle Covid-19 do not stop them being implemented, and should not be used as an excuse by either party.

The regulations made by the Minister for Health, which came into effect on Wednesday 8 April, recognise the right of a parent, guardian, or person having a right of access to a child to leave their home in order to give effect to arrangements for access by that person or for another parent, guardian or person having such right of access.

Clearly during this time there may be instances where it is impossible for couples to adhere strictly to the terms of an Order, and the President of the District Court recently clarified that parents could come to mutually agreed arrangements for alternative contact, which could involve phone calls, or skype etc., such agreement being noted by email or text message.

It is also important to note that if parties cannot agree on an alternative arrangement, mediation services are still available and should be used. The Family Mediation Service of the Legal Aid Board is offering free telephone mediation and conflict coaching. More details about this service can be found at www.legalaidboard.ie, while other free parent support services which provide help and advice are available from www.onefamily.ie and www.treoir.ie

The Judiciary and the Courts Service have advised that the District Court will continue to hear urgent matters in all District Court Districts throughout the country as before, and will resume hearings of certain other urgent matters. Urgent matters are now extended to include additional areas in Criminal, Family, and Child Care Law. In the area of Family Law the President of the District Court announced 8 May changes for matters which can be dealt with.

These include the following:

- Applications and hearings for breach of maintenance or access that have occurred during the emergency period or applications and hearings for temporary guardianship orders.
- Remote call-overs and hearings may be conducted in some courts.
- Consent orders that do not require the hearing of evidence may be applied for by email by the applicant's solicitor exhibiting consent in writing from the respondent's solicitor.

Following consideration by an assigned Judge orders will issue from the Court Office as appropriate without the need for the parties or their legal representatives to attend court.

In the current exceptional circumstances, while court offices are still open, they are only open for essential business, and by appointment only. According to the Practice Direction of the President of the District Court, a case which does not come into the defined urgent category can be treated as urgent if a good case can be made, and this will be decided, by the Court, on a case by case basis. The full details of the statement from the President of the District Court can

be found on the website of the Courts Service.

I hope this information is of some help to families and I would like to emphasise that I am appealing to everyone to remember at all times that the welfare of the child is paramount.

Citizenship Ceremonies

434. **Deputy Hildegarde Naughton** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he will consider holding postponed citizenship ceremonies online in view of the restrictions due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5616/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): Due to the current Covid-19 pandemic, the next scheduled citizenship ceremonies for Friday 3 July 2020, at the INEC in Killarney have had to be postponed.

As the Deputy will be aware, citizenship ceremonies were first introduced in 2011 in order to mark such a significant and important event in a solemn, dignified and appropriate manner. Since then, 151 ceremonies have taken place at various venues throughout the country at which 100,000 applicants have received their certificates of naturalisation.

My officials are currently exploring alternative options to ensure these events are delivered in the dignified and solemn manner appropriate to such an important milestone. It is also essential that any arrangements put in place satisfy the relevant statutory requirements while ensuring the event is a meaningful experience for participants. Apart from satisfying the relevant criteria under the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956, as amended, each applicant must also take an oath of fidelity to the State at the ceremony, administered by a Presiding Officer, normally a retired member of the Judiciary.

All options being considered to facilitate the delivery of citizenship ceremonies will be in a manner that protects public health, complies with current restrictions and guidelines including social distancing protocols and prioritise the safety and wellbeing of participants: applicants, their guests, my officials, the judge and venue staff.

Further updates will be provided by way of a ministerial statement and on the Immigration Service website when available, and I would encourage the Deputy to view our updates on the Immigration Service website at: <http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/COVID-19-updates-and-announcements>

Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service

435. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality when INIS registration appointments which have been cancelled due to the Covid-19 crisis will be rescheduled. [5633/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): Due to COVID-19, on 20 March 2020, I announced that immigration permissions, due to expire between that date and 20 May 2020, were automatically extended for two months on the same basis as the existing permission and with the same conditions attached. If the current permission allowed a person to work, then they could continue to do so on foot of the two month renewal, without the need to register this renewal.

As a result of the continued uncertainties caused by the pandemic, last week (13 May), I

announced a further two month extension for anyone whose permission was due to expire between 20 May 2020 and 20 July 2020. Again, this is on the same basis as the existing permission and with the same conditions attached. In the case of student permissions for international English language students, the person will be required to re-enrol in an on-line course of study to adhere to the conditions of their permission. My officials have engaged with MEI (Marketing English in Ireland), the representative body for the majority of language schools in Ireland. They have confirmed that most colleges are now offering on-line courses, and students should contact their college directly to make any necessary arrangements.

The requirement to register an immigration permission, in person, will not arise until the Registration Office Burgh Quay (and other registration offices) re-opens or alternative arrangements are put in place. They will only reopen when it is safe to do so, in line with Government's Roadmap. As the Deputy will appreciate, high-demand public offices make applying social and physical distancing more difficult.

When the Registration Office reopens, priority will be given to those seeking to register for the first time. Those for first time registration who had appointments cancelled will have their appointments rescheduled automatically. Other appointments will be made available exclusively for other first time applicants.

Additionally, my Department is considering alternative arrangements for renewal of registrations and priority will be given initially to those whose Irish Residence Permit (IRP) card has expired.

Further updates will be provided on the Immigration Service website when available, and I would encourage the Deputy to view our updates on the Immigration Service website at:

<http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/COVID-19-updates-and-announcements>

A detailed Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document is available on this website on the impact of COVID-19 on immigration and international protection. This document is regularly updated.

Peace Commissioners

436. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of peace commissioners appointed in County Tipperary in the past five years; the way in which this compares to the national average; the criteria in place for the appointment of peace commissioners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5774/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): Peace commissioners are appointed (and may be removed from that appointment) by the Minister for Justice and Equality under section 88 of the Courts of Justice Act, 1924. The office of peace commissioner is an honorary appointment and peace commissioners receive no remuneration or compensation by way of fees or expenses for their services.

An application for appointment may be submitted by a person who is interested in obtaining an appointment or a third party may submit a nomination in respect of a person considered suitable for appointment. Nominations are generally received from public representatives. A local Garda Superintendent sometimes requests an appointment in a particular area in the public interest.

There is no qualifying examination involved but appointees are required to be of good char-

acter and they are usually well established in the local community. Persons convicted of serious offences are considered unsuitable for appointment. To this end, a background check on nominees is carried out by An Garda Síochána.

Persons who are members of professions or employed in occupations which engage in legal work or related activities and members of the clergy are, as a matter of practice, not appointed because of their occupation. Civil servants are usually only appointed where the performance of their official duties requires an appointment (I.e. ex-officio).

Statistical information pertaining to the appointment of Peace Commissioners nationally and in Co. Tipperary for the period May 2015 to April 2020 is set out as follows.

Total number of peace commissioners appointed nationally in the last 5 years	Total number of peace commissioners appointed in Tipperary in the last 5 years	Average number of appointments per county, including Dublin, in the last 5 years	Average number of appointments per county, excluding Dublin, in the last 5 years
519	33	20	16

Prisoner Releases

437. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of prisoners released from prison to emergency homeless accommodation or no pre-arranged accommodation over the past 12 months by prison and month in tabular form. [5796/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): As the Deputy will appreciate, measures to address homelessness and provision of accommodation to persons vulnerable to homelessness are the responsibility of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. However, the Irish Prison Service maintains regular contact with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government regarding the release of prisoners who have identified themselves to prison services as homeless or a risk of homelessness.

The objective of the Irish Prison Service is that all releases from Irish prisons and places of detention are planned releases, in order to support offenders in making informed and effective transitions from prison to the community in compliance with statutory, legal and sentencing provisions.

I am advised that, if a sentenced prisoner informs prison authorities that they were homeless prior to coming into custody, or that they are at risk of homelessness on release, they are referred to the prison-based resettlement service. The resettlement service works with the prisoner and the relevant local authority to identify possible accommodation solutions in preparation for their release and reintegration to the community.

I also understand that the Irish Prison Service provides funding to enable the Irish Association for Social Integration Opportunities to provide Resettlement Coordinators in each of our closed prisons and that the number of Resettlement Coordinators across the prison estate has increased from 3 to 12 in recent years. I am informed that as part of additional measures to assist prisoners prepare for release during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Irish Prison Service has assigned a further 6 staff to assist with the resettlement effort.

The Deputy requested specific information on the number of prisoners released from prison to emergency homeless accommodation or no pre-arranged accommodation over the last 12 months by prison and by month. I am advised that the Irish Prison Service that it does not record

statistics in the specific format requested. However, I am informed by the Irish Prison Service that in 2019, the Resettlement Service assisted 363 sentenced prisoners who had declared a risk of homelessness to submit their social housing application in advance of their release. I am further informed that, in 2020 to date, the Resettlement Service has engaged with 457 sentenced prisoners in custody and has submitted 119 applications for social housing support on behalf of prisoners this year.

There is ongoing communication between the Irish Prison Service and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government regarding the release of prisoners who have identified themselves to prison services as at risk of homelessness. I understand that this contact has further increased in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Deputy may also be interested to know that the Irish Prison Service, working in partnership with the Irish Red Cross, has developed a release information pack for prisoners who leaving custody during the current pandemic. The information pack includes information on changes to social norms since the introduction of restrictions including social distancing, new hygiene practices, details of reduced opening hours for public services and details of support and advocacy services available, including housing supports.

Direct Provision System

438. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number and causes of deaths in direct provision and emergency accommodation centres in 2019 and to date in 2020, in line with the recommendations of the 2020 report by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. [5896/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): I can inform the Deputy that sadly three deaths have been notified to the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) of my Department since the introduction of its Critical Incident Policy on 29 November 2019.

The policy provides that once notified of a death, IPAS will record the incident. The Critical Incident Policy also sets out the guidelines for centre managers on what to do should a death occur in their premises.

However, it should be noted that it is the Office of the Coroner who makes the official record of deaths. The IPAS record is only of deaths notified and it is not an official record because this function is held by the General Register Office, which is the central civil repository for records relating to Births, Marriages and Deaths in Ireland.

Animal Welfare

439. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if there are plans to establish a dedicated Garda unit to exclusively deal with animal abuse. [5953/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): In accordance with the Garda Síochána Act 2005 as amended, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for managing and controlling the administration and business of An Garda Síochána. He is also responsible for the allocation of Garda resources and deployment of personnel, in light of identified operational demands. As Minister, I have no direct role in these matters. I understand, however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of

crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

Matters relating to animal welfare are not under my remit as Minister for Justice and Equality. I understand that the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013, which is within the remit of my colleague the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, provides a modern and robust framework for dealing with issues relating to animal welfare.

I am advised by the Garda authorities that there are no plans to establish a dedicated Garda Unit to exclusively deal with animal abuse. However, I understand that An Garda Síochána liaises and works closely with both local authorities and the local offices of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

I understand that all complaints of cruelty to animals made to An Garda Síochána are subject to investigation. The Deputy will appreciate that in any case, it is a matter for the Director of Public Prosecutions to decide if a prosecution should take place, and for what offence.

Direct Provision System

440. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of positive Covid-19 cases and clusters in direct provision centres; and the number of these occurring in new centres opened specifically as a response to the Covid-19 crisis. [5971/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): As the Deputy will appreciate, the COVID-19 pandemic is a public health crisis, the response to which is being led by HSE Public Health, as is appropriate. My Department and management across our network of accommodation centres (both permanent and temporary) are working closely with the HSE to implement their public health advice.

With regard to medical information such as testing, test results and the release of data relating to same, the Deputy will appreciate that these are matters for the HSE in a public health context. Both the HSE and my Department are committed to protecting the medical confidentiality of our residents.

I can confirm that, in line with our agreed policy with the HSE, any centre resident with a positive COVID-19 result has been transferred to an offsite self-isolation facility where they are cared for until such time as the HSE considers that they can safely return to their centre. The offsite facilities are supported by a non-profit (Section 39) organisation and healthcare staff.

My Department and I will continue to work hard with local management, health agencies, and NGOs to provide every support possible to our residents at this difficult time.

Direct Provision System

441. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the safeguards and oversights in place to protect direct provision residents who are forced to self-isolate; and if dietary and other needs at a centre (details supplied) have been deemed as suitable for residents self-isolating. [5972/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): I want to assure the Deputy that my Department is doing everything it can to protect the health and welfare of residents and staff in our accommodation centres, as well as that of the wider community. My Department is working closely with the HSE in doing so, and while the HSE

advice has evolved over time, we have been assured by both it and the Office of the Chief Medical Officer that our approach is appropriate.

All centres, including St. Patrick's Accommodation Centre in Monaghan, are following the guidelines for our centres that have been published by the HSE's Health Protection Surveillance Centre. These are publicly available at its website www.hpsc.ie. That guidance exists precisely because it is recognised that congregated settings such as Direct Provision centres present specific challenges in this pandemic.

The established procedure across all our centres where a person is suspected of having the virus or is confirmed as having the virus, is that, where advised by Public Health, they are moved to a dedicated off-site self-isolation facility where they are cared for until such time as the HSE decides that they can safely return to their centre. My Department has opened four dedicated self-isolation facilities (in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Dundalk) with capacity for 299 people. Residents in these facilities have their own bedroom and their own bathroom.

Since the start of the year, over 1,550 permanent and temporary new Direct Provision beds have been procured including the new dedicated centres in Rosslare Harbour, Caherciveen and Tullamore. We have relocated over 600 residents to support social and physical distancing in centres and cocooning measures for the most vulnerable. By doing this, we have ensured that no more than three single people are sharing a room in any centre. We intend to continue this policy after the crisis. All residents over the age of 65 and those advised to the Department as having a serious medical illness have been cocooned.

Specifically in relation to St. Patrick's Accommodation Centre, I can confirm that there are no residents currently self-isolating on-site. Centre management has introduced the following arrangements to support social and physical distancing and good hygiene practices in the centre at this time:

- Disposable items are used at mealtimes and staff are making tea and coffee to prevent cross contamination in the tea station area. Food, including bread, is wrapped in portions in cellophane, again to prevent contamination.

- All meat supplied to the centre is Halal and their suppliers have continued to deliver without disruption. In relation to the preparation of meals, unfortunately, the main kitchen was closed for renovation in early March so it is not currently available to residents. In addition, the HSE have advised management to close the smaller kitchens, as it was not possible to adhere to the social and physical distancing measures required at this time. The centre staff are currently preparing all meals for the residents in the centre.

- In relation to meals available during Ramadan, the normal practice was that a selected group of residents prepared the specialist meals in the main kitchen for all residents who are observing Ramadan in St. Patrick's Accommodation Centre. However, this year when management approached the residents who usually cook for the people observing Ramadan they indicated that they preferred not to be involved on this occasion. Instead, the centre chefs are preparing the specialist meals for residents to the best of their ability and using Halal meats. Special dates and drinks, herbs and spices, which are traditional during Ramadan, are also provided on a weekly basis to residents.

- All medical prescriptions are being delivered to the centre by local Community Gardaí.

- The playground is currently closed in order to adhere to social and physical distancing requirements.

More generally, residents in all centres have been made aware of the need to practice social

and physical distancing and good hand hygiene and coughing/sneezing etiquette. Translations of public health advice have been provided to centres. During this time, centres have been asked to increase the standard and frequency of cleaning throughout the centres, paying particular attention to communal areas. A regular supply of hand sanitiser is in place for all centres and this is distributed as needed. Other PPE is also distributed as needed and in line with HPSC guidelines on its appropriate use in residential settings.

Departmental Funding

442. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if a reply will issue to an organisation (details supplied) regarding the refusal of a scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6064/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): All applications for funding under the 2019 European Social Fund (“ESF”) Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (“PEIL”) Gender Equality Call for Proposals are subject to a rigorous assessment and moderation process by the Department of Justice and Equality. This also includes the involvement of subject matter experts on the Project Appraisal Committee.

Applications made under the Scheme were screened to ensure they passed an initial completeness check, that is, that they were submitted on time, complete, and met the criteria. Applications passing this check were then subject to assessment regarding the ‘Capacity of Applicant’. Only applications that were ‘selected’ under this criterion were then appraised under the assessment criteria as set out in the ‘Information and Guidance for Applicants’ document published at the launch of the Call.

In 2019 the Department received 39 applications for funding under this scheme, seeking €20.6m of grant funding in total. The available funding was €5.5m, which inevitably meant that some good proposals were not awarded grant funding, while others did not receive the full amount sought.

Organisations that applied for funding under this project received a feedback sheet summarising the assessment of their application by the Department of Justice and Equality. I am informed that the organisation referred to in the Deputy’s question received feedback on its application for funding from the Department on 2 October 2019, and that the Department has not been made aware of any outstanding requests for additional feedback or unanswered queries in the interim.

Departmental Inquiries

443. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of the scoping inquiry relating to the death of a person (details supplied); when the process will be concluded; his plans to establish a public inquiry into the circumstances of the incidents leading to the person’s death and the subsequent response of all statutory agencies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6099/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): As the Deputy will be aware, a retired judge of the District Court, Judge Gerard Haughton, is conducting a scoping exercise into the tragic death of Shane O’Farrell, whose case has been discussed in Dáil Éireann on a number of occasions. The judge furnished an interim report to me on 13 November last. Following consultation with the family concerned, Judge Haughton and the Attorney General, I

published the report on 17 December 2019.

The Terms of Reference for the scoping exercise were drafted with the benefit of legal advice from the Attorney General and with due consideration to the jurisprudence of the Courts, in particular the decision of the Supreme Court in *Shatter v Guerin*.

In his interim report, Judge Haughton states that he will not restrict or limit the family in their submissions to him or the nature and extent of the documentation they wish to furnish to him in his scoping exercise.

I have welcomed the fact that the family are working with Judge Haughton. My Department is in regular contact with the judge and has assured him of any assistance he requires to complete his final report.

Judge Haughton has recently informed my Department and the family concerned of the reasons why he does not believe that he can finalise matters within the timescale referred to in his Interim Report. He has indicated that he believes it will be the end of September before he will be in a position to conclude the scoping exercise.

Judge Haughton is free in his final report to make any recommendation he sees fit, including the establishment of any form of statutory or non-statutory inquiry. I will await the recommendation of Judge Haughton in his final report before making any decision in relation to further inquiries into this matter.

Deportation Orders

444. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of persons (details supplied) who have been issued with a deportation order dated 26 June 2020. [6127/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I can inform the Deputy that the persons concerned are the subject of Deportation Orders. These orders require the persons concerned to remove themselves from the State and remain outside the State. The enforcement of the Deportation Orders is a matter for the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB).

Representations were received from the persons concerned, pursuant to the provisions of Section 3(11) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), requesting that the Deportation Orders be revoked, which will be considered in due course. Requests for revocation are non-suspensive and, as such, the persons concerned are still required to 'present' to the GNIB as requested.

While the enforcement of a Deportation Order is an operational matter for An Garda Síochána through the GNIB, I can also inform the Deputy that appointments for people who have a Deportation Order currently in force and were due to present to the GNIB during the current Covid-19 pandemic have been postponed until further notice. The persons concerned will be notified in writing when they are required to present again.

Further updates will be provided on the Immigration Service website when available, and I would encourage the Deputy to view our updates on the Immigration Service website at:

<http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/COVID-19-updates-and-announcements>

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 with-

out 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.

Question No. 445 answered with Question No. 408.

Covid-19 Pandemic

446. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his plans to adequately deal with businesses that are closed due to Covid-19 and that are unable to keep the terms of their commercial leases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6131/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Government has introduced a broad range of measures and supports to respond to the needs of businesses that are experiencing difficulties due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular I am strongly supportive of the efforts being made by the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation to assist businesses.

Where commercial rents are concerned, this area of the law is very complex and characterized by a multiplicity of contractual arrangements that reflect the diversity of the landlord and tenant relationship in the commercial sphere. I urge all parties to commercial leases to show forbearance and understanding during this very difficult time.

Unaccompanied Minors and Separated Children

447. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his plans to grant asylum to unaccompanied minors currently located in migrant camps on the Greek islands of Lesbos, Chios and Samos; the number of unaccompanied minors granted asylum in 2019; the number of unaccompanied minors he plans to grant asylum to in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6143/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I can inform the Deputy that, subject to the relevant travel clearance being received in the context of the current COVID-19 situation and the availability of flights, 8 unaccompanied minors are expected to be brought to the State in the coming weeks from Greece under the care of Tusla.

Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, has statutory responsibility for the care of any unaccompanied minors in the State. Tusla may decide that an application for international protection should be made on behalf of the minor. Where Tusla decides that it is in the best interests of the child that an application for international protection is made on their behalf, specific arrangements will be made by the International Protection Office (IPO) in conjunction with Tusla for the processing of the application. Tusla will support the minor throughout the process, including attending at their interview.

All applications for international protection made on behalf of unaccompanied minors are prioritised by the IPO for processing. I am further advised that the IPO has specially trained caseworkers to process applications received from unaccompanied minors.

It should be noted that all applicants for international protection are carefully interviewed and their cases are individually assessed by experienced caseworkers. The circumstances of each individual case is assessed having regard to both the subjective elements (the applicant's own account or personal history) and objective elements (up-to-date information on the ap-

plicant's country or place of origin). Supporting documentation submitted by applicants is also taken into account. Country of Origin information is obtained from a variety of legitimate sources such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Amnesty International and other NGOs, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), the US State Department and the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board.

While there were 42 applications from unaccompanied minors on hand at the end of April 2020, the International Protection Office (IPO) cannot predict the number of unaccompanied minors who will receive a recommendation to grant them refugee status in 2020.

24 Unaccompanied Minors were granted International Protection in 2019. None of these cases related to unaccompanied minors from Greek camps. The possibility of other minors, additional to the 8 referred to above, being transferred here from Greece is subject to the necessary accommodation and resources being available to Tusla. This is a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.

Proposed Legislation

448. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he will be tabling a motion to extend sections 2 to 4, 6 to 12, 14 and 17 of the Offences Against the State (Amendment) Act 1998, which are due to expire on the 29 June 2020; if he will be tabling a motion to extend section 8 of the Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009, which is due to expire on the 29 June 2020; when he will publish a report detailing the operation of these sections during the past 12 months as required by the Acts; when he expects to lay these reports before each House of the Oireachtas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6148/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The sections of the Offences Against the State (Amendment) Act 1998 and the Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009 that the Deputy refers to are significant legislative provisions aimed at combating terrorism and organised crime. As the Deputy is aware, if the relevant provisions are to remain in effect there is a statutory requirement to renew them before the end of June.

The Offences against the State (Amendment) Act 1998 was enacted in the aftermath of the Omagh bombing. Section 18 provides that the relevant sections of the Act shall cease to be in operation unless their continuance in force is approved by both Houses of the Oireachtas.

The Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009 provides certain legislative measures to tackle organised crime. Among those measures was section 8, which provides that certain organised crime offences are to be tried in the Special Criminal Court. Section 8(4) provides that the provision will cease to be in operation unless a resolution is passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas.

Section 18(3) of the Offences Against the State (Amendment) Act 1998 Act and Section 8(6) of the and the Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009 provide that, before a resolution for continuance is passed, the Minister for Justice and Equality shall prepare reports, which shall be laid before both Houses, on the operation of the relevant provisions in the period since the previous report.

There remains a real and persistent threat from terrorist activity and organised crime as evidenced by the seizures of firearms, explosives and ammunition by An Garda Síochana and the most serious of cases brought before the Special Criminal Court. It is important that these provisions are renewed and it is my intention to seek their renewal and table the required motions before the Oireachtas.

Proposed Legislation

449. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of legislative measures that expire in 2020 if a motion to extend them is not passed; the dates such legislation are due to expire in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6149/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): There are two pieces of legislation within the remit of my Department that expire in 2020 if a motion to extend is not passed:

Title	Date of Expiration
Offences against the State (Amendment) Act 1998	29 June 2020
Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009	29 June 2020

Offences against the State (Amendment) Act 1998

Section 18 of the Offences against the State (Amendment) Act 1998 provides that the sections of the Act in question (2 to 4, 6 to 12, 14 and 17) shall cease to be in operation unless a Resolution has been passed by each House of the Oireachtas resolving that those sections should continue in operation.

Since June 2000, the Houses of the Oireachtas have, by means of Resolution, renewed on an annual basis all the foregoing sections of act for a further period of 12 months on each occasion. The most recent resolutions in this regard were approved by Dáil and Seanad Éireann in June 2019 and they provided for the continuance in operation of the relevant sections for a period of 12 months from 30 June 2019.

Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009

Section 8 of the Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009 provides that it shall cease to be in operation unless a Resolution has been passed by each House of the Oireachtas resolving that it should continue in force for a period to be determined by the Oireachtas.

Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann have passed such Resolutions on previous occasions, most recently to continue the provisions in operation for a period of 12 months from 30 June 2019.

Garda Equipment

450. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if masks or other personal protective equipment are being made available to gardaí who are on the front line during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6214/20]

495. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if An Garda Síochána has been provided with gloves, face masks and hand sanitisers. [6898/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 450 and 495 together.

As the Deputy is aware, An Garda Síochána is carrying out extensive operations in support of the public health guidelines and restrictions which are in place to prevent or reduce spread of the Covid-19 virus in the community. In that way, An Garda Síochána is working to protect

public health during this pandemic.

The Commissioner is by law responsible for the administration and management of An Garda Síochána, including the distribution of resources and deployment of equipment. The Commissioner also has responsibility for the safety, health and welfare of Garda members.

I am informed that An Garda Síochána provides all Garda Divisions and Specialist Units with PPE on a weekly basis from central stores. I understand that PPE supplies are then distributed by each Division to all Garda Stations under their aegis, to ensure that Garda members and staff have adequate supplies available to meet operational requirements. I understand that a Divisional Inspector is responsible for the distribution of PPE in each Division and stocks are replenished on request.

I am informed that the following is a list of the types of PPE supplies distributed on a weekly basis:

- Hand Sanitiser
- Disposable Gloves
- Face Masks
- Goggles
- Visors/Face Shields
- Disposable Anti-Bacterial Wipes & Sprays
- White Suits/Shoe Covers
- Gowns
- Plastic Aprons
- Signage

In terms of volume, I understand that to date, approximately 2 million pairs of disposable gloves, over 200,000 face masks and 50,000 litres of hand sanitiser in refillable plastic bottles have been distributed.

I am informed by An Garda Síochána that its guidelines for use by frontline Gardaí of personal protective equipment (PPE), including gloves and facemasks, are informed by a dynamic risk-based approach and in accordance with HSE/public health guidance.

I am further informed by the Garda authorities that in line with such advice, from Friday 15 May 2020, members of An Garda Síochána have been directed to wear official-issue face coverings in situations where they are unable to maintain recommended social distancing and may be in close contact with a person or persons for more than 15 minutes.

While I understand that gloves and face masks are available to Garda members on patrol and checkpoint duties, the Garda authorities have informed me that as a matter of course face coverings will not be worn on outdoor duties including checkpoints where social distancing can be maintained.

In line with their risk-based approach, a number of designated vehicles are assigned to each Garda Division, to respond to incidents in which suspected or confirmed cases of Covid19 are a factor. I am informed that members deployed to these vehicles have access to full PPE neces-

sary to ensure an appropriate response to such incidents and that they are deployed by Garda management as required.

The Commissioner has informed me that An Garda Síochána's guidelines are kept under review based on public health advice.

Finally, I understand that An Garda Síochána is working closely with other Government agencies including the Health Service Executive (HSE), Irish Prison Service, Enterprise Ireland, OGP, IDA and community based organisations to ensure the supply chain is maintained and that frontline Garda members are provided with the appropriate equipment to enable them to carry out their duties with confidence in this challenging period.

Direct Provision System

451. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the details of new arrangements put in place to protect those in direct provision during the Covid-19 crisis; if his attention has been drawn to particular concerns raised in respect of a centre (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6263/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): I am pleased to have this opportunity to provide the Deputy with an update on the full range of measures that we, the HSE and centre management are taking to support residents and staff in Direct Provision accommodation at this time.

We are doing everything that we can to protect the health and welfare of our residents and centre staff as well as that of the wider community. We are working closely with the HSE in doing so, and while the HSE advice has evolved over time, we have been assured by both it and the Office of the Chief Medical Officer that our approach is appropriate.

All accommodation centres, including Ciuin House, are carefully following the guidelines for our centres that have been published by the HSE's Health Protection Surveillance Centre, which can be found on its website www.hpsc.ie. That guidance exists precisely because it is recognised that congregated settings such as Direct Provision centres present specific challenges in this pandemic.

Shared bedrooms and communal living space are provided in numerous settings. Similar arrangements apply in homeless and disability services and, indeed, in private rented accommodation.

The direction from the HSE is that during the COVID crisis non-family members sharing a room in Direct Provision centres are considered to be a household. As such, they should implement social distancing measures from other households, i.e. residents in other rooms, and self-isolate if displaying symptoms or if directed by the HSE. In such instances, we provide facilities for self-isolation both on and off-site.

The established procedure across all Centres where a person is suspected of having the virus or is confirmed as having the virus, is that, where advised by Public Health, they are moved to a dedicated offsite self-isolation facility. Supports are available for the duration of their period of isolation until such time as the HSE considers that they can safely return to their centre. My Department has opened four dedicated self-isolation facilities for residents in Dublin, Cork and Limerick, and Dundalk, with a total capacity of 299 rooms. Residents in these facilities have their own bedroom and their own bathroom.

Since the start of the year over 1,550 permanent and temporary Direct Provision bed spaces have been procured, including the dedicated new centres opened in Rosslare Harbour, Caheriveen and Tullamore.

We have relocated over 600 residents to support social and physical distancing in centres and cocooning measures for the most vulnerable. By doing this, we have ensured that no more than three single people are sharing a room in any of our centres. We intend to continue this policy when the crisis is over.

All residents aged 65 or older and those advised to the Department as having a serious medical illness have been cocooned due to their particular vulnerability to this virus.

We are communicating directly with centre managers and residents via regular newsletters, which can also be found on our website www.accommodationcentres.ie. The newsletters have provided practical information on implementing social and physical distancing at this time and promoted shared learning and best practice across our network of centres. Residents have also been made aware of the need for good hand hygiene and coughing/sneezing etiquette. Information and posters have been distributed to all centres and translations of public health information have also been provided. With Ramadan underway, we have also prepared and circulated information for centre managers and residents with practical supports on observing Ramadan during the current COVID restrictions.

During this time, centre managers have also been advised to increase the standard and frequency of cleaning throughout the centres, paying particular attention to communal areas. A regular supply of hand sanitiser for centres is in place and this is distributed to centres as required. Other PPE is distributed, as needed, and in line with the HPSC guidelines for its appropriate use in residential settings.

In partnership with the HSE and Safetynet, my Department has put in place a national clinical telephone service to provide public health advice to support centre staff. It is also being used to advise, support and work with locations where vulnerable groups are present relating to the implementation of COVID-19 guidelines and measures.

Generally, residents of Centres are subject to the same current public health measures as the rest of the population, for example, the right to exercise within a 5km radius, attend medical appointments or to shop for food or other necessities as set out in Government guidelines. However, as with everyone else, where a public health issue arises, Public Health officials may advise that residents stay in their centre and restrict movement for a time while they monitor the situation.

Healthcare workers living in Direct Provision accommodation are eligible to apply for accommodation under the HSE's Temporary Accommodation Scheme announced on 10 April 2020. We are actively encouraging all healthcare workers living in our centres to apply for this temporary accommodation for their protection and that of other centre residents and staff. We have provided information, forms and guidance. We have also asked the NGO community to support this initiative and to help to bring it to the attention of residents through their support networks.

I can assure the Deputy that my Department takes any complaints from residents very seriously and all residents are made fully aware of their ability to contact the Department at any time in confidence. If a complaint is not resolved to the satisfaction of the resident, they can also avail of the services of the Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children, as appropriate. If the Deputy wishes to raise any specific concerns regarding this particular centre with me, I would be happy to have my officials follow up.

In the meantime, the Deputy can be assured that my Department will continue to work closely with the HSE and centre management during this time to protect the health and safety of all residents and staff as a priority.

Covid-19 Pandemic

452. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason asylum seekers were moved to a location (details supplied) in County Kerry following a confirmed case of Covid-19 at their place of residence in Dublin. [6284/20]

453. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason persons were not tested for Covid-19 prior to being moved to a location (details supplied) in County Kerry. [6285/20]

454. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of confirmed Covid-19 cases to date amongst the residents at a location (details supplied). [6286/20]

455. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of Covid-19 cases to date which have been confirmed amongst the employees at a location (details supplied). [6287/20]

456. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason the residents at a location (details supplied) were not informed of the Covid-19 outbreak when it was first confirmed. [6288/20]

457. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason employees at a location (details supplied) were not informed of the Covid-19 outbreak when it was first confirmed. [6289/20]

458. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason the residents and business community of Cahersiveen, County Kerry were not informed of the Covid-19 outbreak at a location (details supplied) when it was first confirmed. [6290/20]

459. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality when the residents at a location (details supplied) were informed of the Covid-19 outbreak in the direct provision centre. [6291/20]

460. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality when the employees at a location (details supplied) were informed of the Covid-19 outbreak in the direct provision centre. [6292/20]

461. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality when the residents of Cahersiveen, County Kerry were informed of the Covid-19 outbreak in the direct provision centre there. [6293/20]

462. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason social distancing and Covid-19 stay safe measures were not implemented at a location (details supplied) from the beginning. [6294/20]

463. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason social distancing was not immediately implemented at a location (details supplied) following the first four confirmed Covid-19 cases. [6295/20]

464. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality when social distanc-

ing was properly introduced at a location (details supplied). [6296/20]

465. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason residents at a location (details supplied) that were sharing communal areas such as a dining room, laundry room and so on were not asked to self-isolate for 14 days following the first confirmed cases of Covid-19. [6297/20]

466. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of the confirmed cases of Covid-19 at a location (details supplied); and if each person has fully recovered. [6298/20]

467. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his views on whether the entire process at a location (details supplied) was poorly managed from the beginning and as a result put the lives and well-being of residents, the employees of the hotel and the residents of Cahersiveen and the Iveragh Peninsula, County Kerry at risk. [6299/20]

468. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his views on whether it was an error of judgment to move persons from Dublin to Cahersiveen, County Kerry during a pandemic. [6300/20]

469. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his plans to issue an apology to the residents and employees at a location (details supplied) and to the residents of Cahersiveen and Iveragh, County Kerry for the distress caused. [6301/20]

470. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if the immediate closure of the direct provision centre in Cahersiveen, County Kerry will be ordered in view of the fact it is viewed as not fit for purpose. [6302/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton):
I propose to take Questions Nos. 452 to 470, inclusive, together.

I want to assure the Deputy that I, Minister Flanagan and our officials take the safety and wellbeing of all international protection applicants and the community in which they reside extremely seriously. That has always been our priority.

I do appreciate that the circumstances in which the Skellig Accommodation Centre was opened did not allow for full engagement with local representatives, communities and services; to inform and reassure them and to answer their questions. That is certainly something that I, Minister Flanagan and our officials regret. But, during a public health emergency the decision to move people to a dedicated accommodation centre was seen as an appropriate positive response.

All centres are following the guidelines for our centres that have been published by the HSE's Health Protection Surveillance Centre. These are publicly available at its website www.hpsc.ie. That guidance exists precisely because it is recognised that congregated settings such as Direct Provision centres present specific challenges in this pandemic. My Department is working closely with the HSE in doing so, and while the HSE advice has evolved over time, we have been assured by both it and the Office of the Chief Medical Officer that our approach is appropriate.

At the very outset of the crisis, my Department discussed with the HSE the fact that we were accommodating some people in commercial hotels that the Department did not have exclusive use of. This was seen as higher risk at that time in the early stages of the pandemic.

For that reason, we needed to move people to dedicated accommodation centres where they

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could receive the full set of State supports and services. To do this, we needed to open more accommodation. The Skellig Star hotel in Cahersiveen had been offered to us and was available for immediate occupancy.

We also opened new centres in Rosslare Harbour and Tullamore and temporary accommodation in Dublin, Cork, Galway and Limerick.

In total, 600 people were relocated to support social and physical distancing including just over 100 people to the new centre in Cahersiveen.

The residents arrived in Cahersiveen on March 18th and 19th. Some of them did come from a hotel in Dublin at which a case of COVID-19 was subsequently confirmed in an unrelated guest. My Department was not told of that confirmed case until it was brought to Minister Flanagan's attention by Deputy Catherine Murphy on 6 April 2020.

From subsequent discussions with management at the hotel, our understanding is that the guest involved had only stayed at the hotel for one night in early March when they fell ill. The guest was removed to hospital and their close contacts were asked by the HSE to self-isolate for 14 days as is the norm. No one that we were accommodating in the hotel was approached as a traced contact, and there was no indication whatsoever that anyone we relocated from that hotel was in any way unwell, was awaiting a test or a test result. In fact, it was well over a fortnight after they arrived before any of our residents in Cahersiveen began to show symptoms and were confirmed as positive for COVID 19.

As the Deputy will appreciate, medical information such as testing, test results and the release of data relating to same are matters for the HSE in a public health context. We can confirm that, in line with our agreed policy with the HSE, anyone who has tested positive has been moved to a dedicated self-isolation facility where they are cared for until such time as the HSE considers that they can safely return to their centre. Everyone else in the centre was asked to self-isolate while the HSE continued to monitor the situation. Thankfully, the HSE has confirmed that that period of self-isolation has ended today (20 May 2020) and all residents are now subject to the same restrictions as anyone else under Phase 1 of the Government's Roadmap.

There are currently 69 residents (including 9 children) onsite in the centre, which has capacity for 150 residents, and 56 bedrooms. Residents are a mix of single people and small sized families. All single residents have been offered their own bedroom and all bedrooms in the centre are en suite. Some residents have declined this offer and have indicated that they wish to self-isolate with their roommate as a family unit. We continue to encourage these residents to accept the offer of their own room at this time.

Guidance has been provided by the HSE to centre management on the enhanced cleaning arrangements required at this time including through an onsite visit by a HSE infection control specialist. This applies to bedrooms, corridors, staircases, the dining room, kitchen, laundry room, lift, public toilets and reception and public areas. This is being strictly adhered to by centre management and staff.

My Department is working closely with the HSE and centre management to provide additional supports for residents during this time. There is a HSE Community Development Worker onsite at the Centre seven days a week to monitor the health of residents. This person is supported by a wider healthcare team. Additional outdoor space has been opened up with some seating provided and, exercise equipment has been set up in the outdoor area for residents' use. This outdoor equipment has been installed with the knowledge and support of HSE public health, and will be operated under their direction for safe use.

The residents are currently provided with three meals and snacks daily. However, in line with the overall policy objectives for accommodation centres, the service provider plans to introduce independent living arrangements with cooking facilities for residents in the coming period. In the meantime, the chefs in the centre are working with the residents to find out about preferred meals and staff have been asked to source and provide ethnic snacks for residents. Kettles have been provided in rooms so that residents can make refreshments throughout the day rather than using communal facilities and meals are also being delivered to rooms. The centre has a good Wi-Fi service and phone credit has also been provided for residents so that they can keep in touch with family and friends.

The current restrictions are especially difficult for children. In addition to the upgrades to the outdoor space, toys, puzzles and tablets have been being provided for children and laptops have also been provided for residents' use. The Tusla official seconded to work with my Department has contacted the families to see what additional supports they need and to discuss any concerns they might have.

Officials from my Department began virtual clinics with residents earlier this week and a telephone support service for residents is also being established with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS).

The Deputy can be assured that my Department will continue to work with accommodation centre management, health agencies and NGOs to provide every support possible to residents at this unprecedented and difficult time for all.

Liquor Licences

471. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the position regarding licences for public houses to be extended that are due to expire in August 2020 in view of the fact that they have been closed for a considerable period of time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6446/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The position is that the Licensing Acts 1833 to 2018 contain statutory provisions for the issue and renewal by the Revenue Commissioners of excise licences for the sale and supply of intoxicating liquor in premises to which on-licences are attached, such as public houses, restaurants, and theatres, as well as those premises to which off licences are attached, such as specialist off licences and mixed trading premises. Under the Finance (1909-10) Act 1910, all retailer's licences expire on 30 September, and are renewable.

Licensed premises to which on-licences are attached, including public houses, are unable to operate under current Covid 19 emergency provisions.

Simplified and streamlined procedures for the renewal of licences are set out in section 4 of the Courts (No.2) Act 1986. Since enactment of that legislation, an applicant does not have to apply to the annual licensing District Court for a certificate as to their good character and the peaceable and orderly manner in which the premises have been operated. Where premises have been licensed in the immediately preceding year, licences may, on application prior to expiry of the existing licence, be renewed by the Revenue Commissioners without production of any such court certificate unless an objection to such renewal has been lodged in the District Court. Applications must be accompanied by the relevant excise duty and a tax clearance certificate under the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997.

In practice, the great majority of licenses are renewed annually by the Revenue Commis-

sioners without undue delay or excessive cost to the licensee.

Rates of duty applicable to licence renewal are applied by the Revenue Commissioners under the Finance Acts. I am informed that the excise duty applicable to renewal of a public house licence is based on the annual turnover of the premises, less excluded turnover. The latter refers to turnover which is not related to the sale of intoxicating liquor or arising from the provision of meals.

It appears therefore that reduced turnover due to non-operation of such premises under current Covid 19 emergency provisions may result in reduced rates of duty on renewal of licences in due course.

Garda Transport

472. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of additional Garda vehicles allocated to each Garda district in the Longford-Westmeath Garda Division to date in 2020. [6450/20]

498. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of Garda cars and vans attached to each Garda district in counties Longford and Westmeath as of 8 May 2020. [6902/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 472 and 498 together.

I would first note that, in accordance with the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for managing and controlling the administration and business of An Garda Síochána. In addition, the allocation of Garda resources is a matter for the Commissioner, in light of identified operational demands. This includes responsibility for the allocation of Garda vehicles among the various Garda divisions. As Minister, I have no role in these matters. I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that in 2020 to date and as of 12 May, 6 additional vehicles have been assigned to the Westmeath Division, of which 1 car was assigned to the Athlone District and 5 cars were assigned to the Mullingar District.

I am further informed that in 2020 to date and as of 12 May, 4 additional vehicles have been assigned to the Roscommon-Longford Division, of which 2 cars have been assigned to the Roscommon District and 2 cars have been assigned to the Longford District.

The following table, conveyed to me by the Garda authorities, sets out the vehicles attached to Roscommon/ Longford Division and Westmeath Division as at 12 May 2020, including the allocations identified in this response.

ROSCOMMON-LONGFORD DIVISION	Cars	Vans	Bikes	4x4	*Others	Total
CASTLEREA DISTRICT	11	4	0	0	3	18
GRANARD DISTRICT	4	2	0	0	0	6

ROSCOMMON-LONGFORD DIVISION	Cars	Vans	Bikes	4x4	*Others	Total
LONGFORD DISTRICT	13	2	1	0	0	16
ROSCOMMON DISTRICT	12	5	2	0	0	19
TOTAL	40	13	3	0	3	59

WESTMEATH DIVISION	Cars	Vans	Bikes	4x4	*Others	Total
ATHLONE DISTRICT	12	2	1	1	0	16
MULLINGAR DISTRICT	45	14	2	0	1	62
TOTAL	57	16	3	1	1	78

*The category 'Others' refers to MPV, SUV, Minibus or Prisoner Conveyance Vehicles

It may be noted that significant capital investment is being made in An Garda Síochána. This includes a total of €46 million specifically for the Garda fleet between 2016 and 2021. Of this investment, a total of €9 million has been made available for purchase and fit-out of additional Garda vehicles in 2020. This continuing investment is intended to ensure that An Garda Síochána has a modern, effective and fit-for-purpose fleet and that Gardaí can be mobile, visible and responsive on the roads and in the community to prevent and tackle crime.

The details set out above relate to the permanent Garda fleet and do not include detail of additional vehicles which have been hired by An Garda Síochána in the context of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and related public health restrictions.

Court Accommodation Provision

473. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if the new District Court in Gorey, County Wexford will remain open. [6459/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): As the Deputy is aware, under the provisions of the Courts Service Act 1998, management of the courts, including the provision of accommodation for court sittings, is the responsibility of the Courts Service, which is independent in exercising its functions. The scheduling and hearing of court cases is a matter for the Presidents of the Courts and the presiding Judges. However, in order to be of assistance to the Deputy, I have had enquiries made with the Courts Service.

In response to the current public health emergency, a series of important measures were announced on Monday the 16th March and, most recently on Friday 8th May, by the Chief Justice and the President of the District Court. The measures are focused on ensuring essential access to the administration of justice in a manner fully respecting public safety and considering government public health advice.

It is in the context of these measures that Judge Brian O'Shea, the District Judge assigned to Wexford, has directed that all business be moved from Gorey to Wexford courthouse until the end of this term. I understand that the Courts Service has sent an email to the local court users

to inform them of the revised arrangements

This an interim measure to allow for the use of videolink technology (particularly to avoid the unnecessary transport of prisoners during the pandemic) and to facilitate greater social distancing in a larger court building.

The Courts Service expect business to resume as normal in Gorey once circumstances permit and the situation will continue to be kept under tight review.

I appreciate that the current public health emergency is causing a great deal of anxiety for everyone and I am grateful for the efforts of all, including users of our courts, in supporting efforts to ensure continuity of administration of justice while upholding the public health measures to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Garda Resources

474. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason the museum at the Garda College has been closed; the person or body that took this decision; the consultation that took place; his views on this decision; if the museum will be reopened in the near future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6460/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Deputy will appreciate that the administration and management of An Garda Síochána is by law a matter for the Garda Commissioner and not for me as Minister.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that there has never been a formal Museum at the Garda College. That said, I understand that over time, a building which had been designed as a Communication Centre was used to store artefacts which were displayed in a way that allowed viewing by particular groups of the public visiting the Garda College.

As the Deputy will appreciate and in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, public access to the Garda College has been prohibited since 12 March 2020. Further, newly attested Gardaí as well as 164 sworn members of Garda College staff have been deployed to operational duties in order to enhance Garda capacity to respond to that pandemic.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that, in keeping with a revised approach to space management, the artefacts which were previously housed in the Communication Centre are being re-distributed throughout the College, to create a walking tour of the College and enhance community engagement, when Covid-19 restrictions are lifted.

Garda Recruitment

475. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality further to Parliamentary Question No. 385 of 5 March 2020, the date on which the broader review of entry to An Garda Síochána will commence; when it will conclude and its recommendations implemented; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6501/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): Recruitment to An Garda Síochána is governed by the Garda Síochána (Admissions and Appointments) Regulations 2013 which provide that the age at which a person may apply to join An Garda Síochána as a full time member is not more than 35 years.

As the Deputy will be aware, in December 2018 the Government endorsed the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland and the report is now being implemented in accordance with the targets and timelines set out in the 4-year plan “A Policing Service for the Future”.

Among the issues highlighted in the Commission’s report was that An Garda Síochána should reflect the diversity of Irish society and should therefore develop recruitment strategies to achieve a more diverse intake. These recommendations echoed those of the Garda Inspectorate following their examination of entry routes into An Garda Síochána. These reports highlighted certain issues in relation to recruitment strategies for An Garda Síochána, including the maximum age of recruitment.

It is planned that the question of the appropriate age for recruitment to An Garda Síochána will be considered as part of that broader review of entry to An Garda Síochána. Work is currently underway on the drafting of Terms of Reference for a Working Group which will bring this review forward, once established.

Garda Stations

476. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the position regarding providing a new Garda station in Clonmel, County Tipperary. [6506/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Deputy will appreciate that the Office of Public Works (OPW) has responsibility for the provision and maintenance of Garda accommodation. As a result, all works to the Garda estate involve close cooperation between the OPW and the Garda authorities.

The programme of replacement and refurbishment of Garda accommodation is progressed by the Garda authorities working in close cooperation with the OPW which has the responsibility for the provision and maintenance of Garda accommodation.

The Garda Building and Refurbishment Programme 2016-2021 programme is based on agreed Garda priorities and benefits over 30 locations around the country, underpinned by significant Exchequer funding across the Garda and OPW Votes. The goal of this investment is to address deficiencies in the Garda estate and provide fit-for-purpose facilities for Garda members and staff as well as the public interacting with them.

The ongoing Building and Refurbishment Programme includes provision for the development of a new Garda Station in Clonmel, Co Tipperary. As the Deputy may be aware, it is intended for the Garda station in Clonmel is to be provided by way of a public private partnership (PPP) project, including also a new station at Macroom, Co Cork.

Public Private Partnership (PPP) projects are progressed under the auspices of the National Development Finance Agency (NDFA). My Department, An Garda Síochána, the OPW and the NDFA are working closely in order to progress this PPP.

I am informed that, in advance of the delivery of the new Garda Station in Clonmel, An Garda Síochána is liaising with the OPW in order to improve working conditions at the station and to meet current Garda operational needs in that regard.

I understand that an office space close to the station has been refurbished to provide necessary space for operational use; and further that the cells and the prisoner processing/reception areas have been upgraded, that the staff kitchen has been refurbished and that female locker

rooms have been created. I am further informed that An Garda Síochána is engaging with the OPW on an ongoing basis in connection with additional upgrade works at the existing station for the benefit of both Garda personnel and the community served by that station.

Garda Resources

477. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of asset profilers in the Tipperary Garda division in each of the past two years. [6507/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Criminal Assets Bureau (CAB) is a multi-agency statutory body established under the Criminal Assets Bureau Act 1996. The primary objective of the Bureau is to identify the proceeds of criminal activities and deprive people of the benefits of such criminal proceeds.

CAB operates nationally and is supported in its work by a network of over 470 trained asset profilers. These asset profilers work hand-in-hand with local Garda management and communities and I am pleased to say this has proved extremely effective.

I am informed by CAB that there were eight trained asset profilers in Tipperary Division at end 2018 and 2019. The Deputy may wish to be aware that as at end March 2020 there were 9 asset profilers assigned to Tipperary Division.

I am informed that the Criminal Assets Bureau typically conducts training courses for Asset Profilers twice per year. I understand that courses which have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic will be rearranged as soon as practicable.

I am further informed that for the most part, Asset Profilers are members of An Garda Síochána from local divisions and from specialist units. In addition, a small number have been trained from Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and from the Office of the Revenue Commissioners. I understand that training has also been given to a number of officers from the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, the Insolvency Service of Ireland and the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement.

Garda Transport

478. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if a new contract to supply new marked Garda vans has recently been put out to tender; if so, when new Garda vans will come into the fleet; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6521/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): In accordance with the Garda Síochána Act 2005 as amended, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for managing and controlling the administration and business of An Garda Síochána. In addition, the allocation of Garda resources is a matter for the Commissioner, in light of identified operational demands. This includes responsibility for the allocation of Garda vehicles among the various Garda divisions. As Minister, I have no role in these matters. I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

Significant capital investment is being made in An Garda Síochána, including a total of €46 million specifically for the Garda fleet between 2016 and 2021. Of this investment, a total of €9 million has been made available for purchase and fit-out of additional Garda vehicles in 2020. This continuing investment is intended to ensure that An Garda Síochána has a modern,

effective and fit-for-purpose fleet and that Gardaí can be mobile, visible and responsive on the roads and in the community to prevent and tackle crime.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that all vehicle tenders and contract for Garda Vehicles are handled through the Office of Government Procurement (OGP). I have no role in these matters as Minister.

I am informed that mini-competitions have been issued to the market for vans and that, due to Covid-19 and subsequent requests from suppliers, the closing date in that case was extended to mid-June. I am informed, and the Deputy will appreciate, that the timeline for completion of this process and provision of vehicles is dependent on the market's ability to respond to tenders and the supply of vehicles in light of the Covid-19 global pandemic.

In that regard it may be of interest to the Deputy to know that, in order to protect the ongoing availability of vehicles and in anticipation of impacts of public health restrictions on motor factory or fit-out workplaces, 94 additional vehicles were purchased by the Garda authorities in March 2020 at a cost of €2.4m. The fit-out cost of these vehicles was €600,000. I am further advised that 210 hired vehicles have been allocated nationwide at this time, at a monthly hire cost €45,545, excluding fuel and other costs.

Garda Youth Diversion Projects

479. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the budget allocation for the Garda Youth Diversion Programme in each of the years 2018 to 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6528/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The statutory framework relating to young offenders and the Garda Diversion Programme is set out in the Children Act 2001. The nationwide network of Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDPs) is supported by my Department.

I understand that there are currently some 105 Garda Youth Diversion Projects. GYDPs are community based, multi-agency, crime prevention initiatives which primarily seek to divert young people who have become involved in criminal or anti-social behaviour. They aim to support young people to develop and mature through positive interventions and interactions with a local project. GYDPs provide a range of education and training programmes e.g. academic support, IT, employment preparation and specific job training.

Since 2015, GYDPs have been co-funded under the Programme for Employability Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) of the European Social Fund (ESF) 2014-2020.

My Department is pursuing an ambitious programme for the future development of GYDP services, working closely with community organisations and with expert support from the Research Evidence into Policy Programmes and Practice project in the University of Limerick.

The funding provided for Garda Youth Diversion Projects in the years 2018 to date is set out in the following table.

Year	Amount
2018	€13.7m (expenditure)
2019	€15.8m (expenditure)
2020	€18.3m (allocation)

The Deputy may also wish to be aware that the draft Youth Justice Strategy 2020-2026 has recently been published for public consultation by my colleague the Minister for State David Stanton. An online questionnaire is available until the end of June to allow members of the public, including of course young people, to express their views. Further information is available on my Department's website at the following link:

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Youth_Justice_Strategy_Public_Consultation

Dublin Airport Authority

480. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he engaged in or received correspondence with the management team at Dublin Airport or the Dublin Airport board of directors in relation to flights from northern Italy from January 2020 to date; if so, the nature of the correspondence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6530/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): My Department has no record of any engagement or correspondence with either the management team at Dublin Airport or the Dublin Airport board of directors in relation to the matter referred to by the Deputy.

I can inform the Deputy that in the interest of public health, the Government is requesting that operators of aircraft ensure that all persons entering the state are aware of the requirement to complete an Irish public health passenger locator form on arrival into Ireland. Passengers arriving by plane or ferry are requested to self-isolate for 14 days. They are provided with an information leaflet explaining the request and with a form to complete setting out their contact details and where they will self-isolate.

In the current climate we are operating in a situation where people should only be travelling where it is essential, and the numbers arriving into Ireland are very small, the majority of which are Irish citizens returning home. Any person intending to travel who may not be in a position to self-isolate should, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, reconsider their need to travel to Ireland at this time. There are a limited number of exempt categories of passengers, for example supply chain workers (such as pilots, hauliers or maritime crew members) or passengers who are transiting en route to another jurisdiction including Northern Ireland.

On behalf of the health authorities, the collection of public health passenger locator forms and the system of spot checks and follow up calls are being rolled out on an administrative basis by officials from the Border Management Unit (BMU) of my Department of Justice and Equality and the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB). The BMU operate the scheme at Dublin Airport on behalf of the health authorities, which, at this time, is the principal route through which people are entering the State by air.

The BMU at Dublin Airport, on behalf of the health authorities, has established a system to follow-up on all arrivals at a proportionate rate of a minimum of 70%, after removal of the exempt categories of passengers. The cohort of passengers failing to answer initial phone calls are followed up with repeated further telephone contacts. The first calls are made two days after passengers have arrived into the State. For any passengers staying in the State for up to 14 days or more, a second call will be made on day 10 to ensure they are still residing at the address provided and self-isolating.

Asylum Applications

481. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of Irish Refugee Protection Programme Humanitarian Admission Programme proposals that were received in the second open call ending on 8 February 2019; the number of final decisions that have been made; the number of persons that have been granted permission to come here pursuant to the second open call; the number of proposals yet to receive a decision; and when it is expected that all proposals will receive a decision. [6551/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Irish Refugee Protection Programme Humanitarian Admission Programme 2 (IHAP), which I announced in May 2018 and which is operated and administered under my discretionary powers is a part of the Government's plan to realise the full commitment of 4,000 refugees agreed under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme in September 2015. Under IHAP, a commitment was made to admit 740 family members of refugees, of which 159 people have already arrived in Ireland as of the beginning of this year.

The programme allows holders of International Protection Status in Ireland, (i.e. refugees with Convention or Programme Refugee status), holders of Subsidiary Protection grants, and Irish citizens, to make a proposal to me to bring to the State their family members who are nationals of one of the top ten major source countries of refugees as identified by the UNHCR Annual Global Trends Report.

The Irish Refugee Protection Programme Humanitarian Admission Programme 2 (IHAP) received proposals for inclusion in the programme within defined periods or 'windows for submissions'. The first window for accepting proposals ran from 14 May 2018 to 30 June 2018. Processing of the proposals from this first window was completed in 2018.

The second window for accepting proposals under the IHAP ran from 20 December 2018 to 8 February 2019. In this second window 827 proposals were received in respect of 1,782 potential beneficiaries. To date final decisions have issued in 747 proposals, accounting for 1,597 potential beneficiaries. Of these proposals, 255 were granted in respect of 440 beneficiaries.

The remaining 80 outstanding proposals, in respect of 185 potential beneficiaries, are currently being processed. It is expected that these outstanding proposals will include both grants and refusals. Decisions will be issued in respect of the outstanding proposals in due course. It is intended to have these finalised before Q3 2020.

Asylum Seekers

482. **Deputy Stephen Donnelly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if his attention has been drawn to the lack of liaison support for persons in emergency accommodation being provided to asylum seekers in a hotel (details supplied) in County Wicklow including lack of social worker and liaison for physical and mental healthcare; if the appropriate resources will be deployed to the asylum seekers as a matter of urgency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6623/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): I can inform the Deputy that the issue of providing liaison support for residents in the accommodation location referred to by the Deputy is a matter for the Department of Health. They have advised that the issue will be raised with the HSE and that they will revert to the Deputy in due course.

However, it is important to note that services for international protection applicants including health services are mainstreamed. Applicants are linked with primary care services. They

are entitled to a medical card while residing in Direct Provision accommodation and their prescription charges are waived. Applicants access health services through the same referral pathways as citizens including referral to disability and mental health services. Every effort is made to ensure that residents' specific needs are met. Where more intensive care needs are required, such cases are referred directly to the HSE.

Safetynet, a primary care health service, carries out health screening in a number of temporary accommodation locations on behalf of the HSE. Officials in my Department work closely with the HSE screening team and with Safetynet to ensure that applicants are accommodated in locations where their medical needs can be met. We also work collaboratively to ensure that any special accommodation arrangements (for example, ground floor accommodation, wheelchair accessible facilities etc.) are in place, as required.

I can assure the Deputy that the health and safety of our residents, centre staff and the wider community where they live will continue to be our over-riding priorities. We will continue to work hard with local management, health agencies, and NGOs to provide every support possible to residents at this difficult time.

Direct Provision System

483. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the measures being taken to assist physical distancing in direct provision centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6667/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): I am pleased to have this opportunity to provide the Deputy with an update on the full range of measures that we, the HSE and centre management are taking to support residents and staff in Direct Provision accommodation at this time.

We are doing everything that we can to protect the health and welfare of our residents and centre staff as well as that of the wider community. We are working closely with the HSE in doing so, and while the HSE advice has evolved over time, we have been assured by both it and the Office of the Chief Medical Officer that our approach is appropriate.

All accommodation centres are carefully following the guidelines for our centres that have been published by the HSE's Health Protection Surveillance Centre, which can be found on its website www.hpsc.ie. That guidance exists precisely because it is recognised that congregated settings such as Direct Provision centres present specific challenges in this pandemic.

Shared bedrooms and communal living space are provided in numerous settings. Similar arrangements apply in homeless and disability services and, indeed, in private rented accommodation.

The direction from the HSE is that during the COVID crisis non-family members sharing a room in Direct Provision centres are considered to be a household. As such, they should implement social distancing measures from other households, i.e. residents in other rooms, and self-isolate if displaying symptoms or if directed by the HSE. In such instances, we provide facilities for self-isolation both on and off-site.

The established procedure across all Centres where a person is suspected of having the virus or is confirmed as having the virus, is that, where advised by Public Health, they are moved to a dedicated offsite self-isolation facility. Supports are available for the duration of their period of isolation until such time as the HSE considers that they can safely return to their centre. My

Department has opened four dedicated self-isolation facilities for residents in Dublin, Cork and Limerick, and Dundalk, with a total capacity of 299 rooms. Residents in these facilities have their own bedroom and their own bathroom.

Since the start of the year over 1,550 permanent and temporary Direct Provision bed spaces have been procured, including the dedicated new centres opened in Rosslare Harbour, Caher-civeen and Tullamore.

We have relocated over 600 residents to support social and physical distancing in centres and cocooning measures for the most vulnerable. By doing this, we have ensured that no more than three single people are sharing a room in any of our centres. We intend to continue this policy when the crisis is over.

All residents aged 65 or older and those advised to the Department as having a serious medical illness have been cocooned due to their particular vulnerability to this virus.

We are communicating directly with centre managers and residents via regular newsletters, which can also be found on our website www.accommodationcentres.ie. The newsletters have provided practical information on implementing social and physical distancing at this time and promoted shared learning and best practice across our network of centres. Residents have also been made aware of the need for good hand hygiene and coughing/sneezing etiquette. Information and posters have been distributed to all centres and translations of public health information have also been provided. With Ramadan underway, we have also prepared and circulated information for centre managers and residents with practical supports on observing Ramadan during the current COVID restrictions.

During this time, centre managers have also been advised to increase the standard and frequency of cleaning throughout the centres, paying particular attention to communal areas. A regular supply of hand sanitiser for centres is in place and this is distributed to centres as required. Other PPE is distributed, as needed, and in line with the HPSC guidelines for its appropriate use in residential settings.

In partnership with the HSE and Safetynet, my Department has put in place a national clinical telephone service to provide public health advice to support centre staff. It is also being used to advise, support and work with locations where vulnerable groups are present relating to the implementation of COVID-19 guidelines and measures.

Generally, residents of Centres are subject to the same current public health measures as the rest of the population, for example, the right to exercise within a 5km radius, attend medical appointments or to shop for food or other necessities as set out in Government guidelines. However, as with everyone else, where a public health issue arises, Public Health officials may advise that residents stay in their centre and restrict movement for a time while they monitor the situation.

Healthcare workers living in Direct Provision accommodation are eligible to apply for accommodation under the HSE's Temporary Accommodation Scheme announced on 10 April 2020. We are actively encouraging all healthcare workers living in our centres to apply for this temporary accommodation for their protection and that of other centre residents and staff. We have provided information, forms and guidance. We have also asked the NGO community to support this initiative and to help to bring it to the attention of residents through their support networks.

We will continue to work closely with the HSE and centre management during this time to protect the health and safety of all residents and staff as a priority.

Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service

484. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if a further extension on all emigration permissions will be issued from 20 May 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6668/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I can inform the Deputy that in light of the current uncertainties caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19, I have announced that immigration permissions, due to expire between 20 May 2020 and 20 July 2020, have been automatically extended for two months.

This includes people in Ireland on short stay visas and those whose permissions have already been extended by the previous notice, which extended permissions between 20 March 2020 and 20 May 2020. The renewal of permission is on the same basis as the existing permission and the same conditions are attached.

Any permission which was renewed by the notice of 20 March 2020 and which therefore has a new expiry date between 20 May and 20 July 2020 is now automatically renewed for a further two months. For international English language students, this means that they will continue to be able to work if they so wish, but they must also re-enrol in an on-line course of study to adhere to the conditions of their permission. Officials from my Department have engaged with MEI (Marketing English in Ireland), the representative body for the majority of language schools in Ireland. They have confirmed that most colleges are now offering on-line courses, and students should contact their college directly to make any necessary arrangements.

In relation to persons with existing permission under Directive 2004/38/EC (Free Movement Directive), the automatic renewal is subject to the requirement that the person is complying with the requirements of the Directive.

The Registration Office in Burgh Quay and all Registration Offices for non-Dublin residents operated by An Garda Síochána remain temporarily closed due to COVID-19. Consequently, the requirement to present at a registration office to register a new permission or renew a current permission is also temporarily suspended.

Further updates will be provided on the Immigration Service website when available, and I would encourage the Deputy to view our updates on the Immigration Service website at:

<http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/COVID-19-updates-and-announcements>

A detailed Frequently Asked Questions document on the COVID-19 impact on immigration and international protection can also be found on the website. This document is regularly updated.

Garda Stations

485. **Deputy Darragh O'Brien** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of the works on Rush Garda station; the date the station is scheduled to be reopened; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6706/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): First it is important to note that the Office of Public Works has responsibility for the provision and maintenance of Garda accommodation. Works in relation to Garda accommodation are therefore progressed by the Garda authorities working in close cooperation with the Office of Public Works (OPW).

I am advised that the works required to reopen Rush Garda station have been completed and that the building has been handed over by the OPW to the Garda authorities.

I am informed however, that in light of the current Covid-19 pandemic, the IT works which will be required prior to Rush station becoming operational have not yet been carried out.

More generally and as the Deputy may be aware, as part of its action to mitigate the risks around the transmission of Covid-19 between Garda personnel and/or members of the public, Garda management has identified a range of alternative accommodation including educational institutions, local community facilities and so on, which are available to Garda management across the country in order to assist in protecting members and staff against Covid-19. I understand that these facilities, where in use, are acting as a facility supplementary to the local Garda Station, to ensure compliance with social distancing guidelines, minimising the concentration of personnel in a particular location. This contributes to the protection of Garda members and staff and to the organisational resilience of An Garda Síochána.

I am informed that, in a similar context, Rush station is currently being held as a contingency building, in the event other stations become impacted by Covid-19 infection. I am further advised that when the public health situation allows, Rush Garda station will reopen to the public.

Covid-19 Pandemic

486. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality further to Covid Query No. 5.709 (details supplied), the specific changes being proposed to the insolvency legislation as a consequence of the Covid-19 outbreak; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6711/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I refer the Deputy to my most recent PQ answers on this matter.

In my reply to question No. 5.709 of 11 May, referred to by the Deputy, I indicated that my officials are considering certain specific formal or procedural statutory requirements which may be difficult or impracticable to comply with, due to COVID-19 restrictions, including a small number of requirements under the Personal Insolvency Acts, so that any necessary amendments could be addressed in an urgent forthcoming Bill. I also indicated that those changes are in addition to the changes which may be proposed under the statutory review of the Personal Insolvency Acts, due to report later this year.

In response to another parliamentary question, no. 369, on this issue, put to me by Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív on 13 May 2020, I provided a detailed answer regarding the changes which are under consideration, arising from the statutory review.

It is not possible at this stage to provide further details on the exact changes to be included in the forthcoming COVID-related Bill, as these have not been finalised at this point in time

Domestic Violence Refuges Provision

487. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he will put in place a short-term emergency rent supplement which would enable men, women and children in need of immediate relocation due domestic violence to access safe housing for a period of three months and or the duration of the Covid-19 national emergency; and if he will make a

statement on the matter. [6728/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): It is important to note that the provision of Rent Supplement is a matter for my colleague the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection and not for me as Minister for Justice and Equality. I understand that the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection is replying to a number of parliamentary questions on that issue today.

I would add only that I am conscious of the added fear and risk of domestic abuse which some people face, in the context of the current Covid-19 restrictions on movement and gatherings.

In recognition of this, my Department has developed an inter-agency plan to address domestic abuse during this period. I can assure the Deputy that An Garda Síochána continue to attach the highest priority to domestic abuse incidents. Arrangements have also been made by the Courts Service and Legal Aid Board to ensure that the legal system remains accessible to victims of domestic abuse. In addition to funding already allocated for 2020, my Department has to date provided an additional €285,000 to date to organisations in the sector, to support and extend the existing services they offer during this period of the Covid-19 crisis. We are also leading a public awareness campaign on domestic abuse during the Covid-19 crisis, in partnership with victim support services in the community and voluntary sector. Further information on the organisations involved in this initiative as well as services and supports for victims is available on a new website www.stillhere.ie.

European Court of Justice

488. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality when the latest Report of the Accountant of the Courts of Justice will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6765/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The most up to date report of the Accountant of the Courts of Justice was published on 31st March 2020 and can be found on the Courts Service website.

For the Deputy's convenience, here is a direct link to the report:

<https://beta.courts.ie/view/document/e184b845-c657-4a75-ac34-13be650c0f04/Accountant%20Report%202019.pdf/pdf>

Undefined

489. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if his attention has been drawn to the growth in drug intimidation in many working class communities but not exclusively so; his plans to address this; and his further plans to introduce or work on new legislation to confront and address this issue. [6780/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I share the Deputy's concern about the serious issue of drug-related intimidation in communities which involves the targeting of persons who use drugs, or their family or friends in relation to a drug debt.

I appreciate that the threat of violence to enforce drug debt impacts people's lives greatly and can create an atmosphere of fear within communities. While the reality is that drug-related

crime occurs in communities nationwide, in many instances the communities most acutely affected are already marginalised and are also having to contend with other forms of criminality associated with the illicit drugs trade. This type of crime can have a serious impact of perceptions and feelings of safety in these communities. I am acutely aware of the importance of tackling such behaviour effectively.

Government policy is guided by the national drugs strategy “Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery - a health led response to drug and alcohol use in Ireland 2017-2025”. This represents a whole-of-government evidence-informed response to the scourge of drug and alcohol use in Ireland. Implementation of the Strategy is led by my colleague, the Minister for Health and the Minister of State with special responsibility for the National Drugs Strategy and Health Promotion, although obviously the Strategy includes a wide range of actions for all stakeholders, including my Department and An Garda Síochána.

An Garda Síochána continues to proactively tackle all forms of drug crime. The Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau is having significant success in disrupting drug trafficking and the supply of illicit drugs in Ireland, as well as organised crime groups. Its work is supported by Divisional Drugs Units nationwide, and of course more generally by all Gardaí working in local communities.

As the Deputy may be aware, there is specific action in the National Drugs Strategy in relation to drug-related intimidation. An Garda Síochána, in partnership with the National Family Support Network (NFSN), has developed ‘The Drug Related Intimidation Reporting Programme’, which is now been implemented on a national level since 2013, to respond to the needs of drug users and family members who may be subject to the threat of drug related intimidation.

In fact Ireland’s National Drugs Strategy is unique among national drugs strategies across EU Member States in recognising the need to address drug-related debt intimidation at a community level. I am advised that An Garda Síochána and the National Family Support Network have each concluded their own separate evaluations of the Drug Related Intimidation Reporting Programme and have jointly agreed a number of actions in relation to the programme going forward. It has been agreed that the effectiveness of this Programme will be further enhanced through training, knowledge sharing and awareness raising.

More broadly and recognising that the issue of drug use and drug related crime in communities is a complex and multi-faceted one, the Deputy might be interested to know of the “Greentown” project, a research project examining the recruitment by criminal networks of children in Ireland and to make recommendations for interventions to disrupt children being lured into criminality. The project is led by the REPPP Project (Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice) at the School of Law in the University of Limerick and is a strategic research partnership with the University of Limerick, funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and supported by my own Department.

Finally and as the Deputy will be aware, a key principle arising from the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing is that policing is not the responsibility of the police alone, but also involves other agencies of Government, such as health or social services, as well as other sectors of society. This principle is at the centre of a new policy on community safety which is being developed in my Department. The policy, which will be given a statutory basis in the new Policing and Community Safety Bill, proposes to establish and support a system of community safety at local level across the country. Through cross-sectoral collaboration, and by drawing on the available services, these systems will be best placed to identify, support and implement, community safety according to the needs of the local community.

490. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the position regarding fathers' rights to equal access to their children; his views on fathers' difficulties in securing access to see their children in spite of court orders; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6800/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I appreciate the concerns that the public health emergency is causing for many families in relation to court orders for access. Setting the terms of court orders and related proceedings are matters proper to the judiciary. Neither I nor my Department are involved in such matters.

It is important to point out first and foremost that court orders in relation to access remain in place. Everyone should understand that the restrictions brought in to tackle Covid-19 do not stop them being implemented, and should not be used as an excuse by either party.

The Regulations made by the Minister for Health, which came into effect on Wednesday 8 April, recognise the right of a parent, guardian, or person having a right of access to a child to leave their home in order to give effect to arrangements for access by that person or for another parent, guardian or person having such right of access.

Clearly during this time there may be instances where it is impossible for couples to adhere strictly to the terms of an Order, and the President of the District Court recently clarified that parents could come to mutually agreed arrangements for alternative contact, which could involve phone calls, or skype etc., such agreement being noted by email or text message.

It is also important to note that if parties cannot agree on an alternative arrangement, mediation services are still available and should be used. The Family Mediation Service of the Legal Aid Board is offering free telephone mediation and conflict coaching. More details about this service can be found at www.legalaidboard.ie, while other free parent support services which provide help and advice are available from www.onefamily.ie and www.treoir.ie

The Judiciary and the Courts Service have advised that the District Court will continue to hear urgent matters in all District Court Districts throughout the country as before, and will resume hearings of certain other urgent matters. Urgent matters are now extended to include additional areas in Criminal, Family, and Child Care Law. In the area of Family Law the President of the District Court announced 8 May changes for matters which can be dealt with.

These include the following:

- Applications and hearings for breach of maintenance or access that have occurred during the emergency period or applications and hearings for temporary guardianship orders.
- Remote call-overs and hearings may be conducted in some courts.
- Consent orders that do not require the hearing of evidence may be applied for by email by the applicant's solicitor exhibiting consent in writing from the respondent's solicitor.

Following consideration by an assigned Judge orders will issue from the Court Office as appropriate without the need for the parties or their legal representatives to attend court.

In the current exceptional circumstances, while court offices are still open, they are only open for essential business, and by appointment only. According to the Practice Direction of the President of the District Court, a case which does not come into the defined urgent category can be treated as urgent if a good case can be made, and this will be decided, by the Court, on a

case by case basis. The full details of the statement from the President of the District Court can be found on the website of the Courts Service.

I hope this information is of some help to families and I would like to emphasise that I am appealing to everyone to remember at all times that the welfare of the child is paramount.

Prisoner Data

491. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of prisoners in the prison system; the number of these sharing cells; the reduction in the number of prisoners sharing cells since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic; and the further steps proposed to be taken to reduce this number in order to reduce the risk of a large scale outbreak of Covid-19 in the prison system. [6808/20]

492. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of prisoners let out on temporary release or on community return since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic compared to the same period in 2019; the number of prisoners currently in prison serving sentences that have less than six months left to run; if consideration has been given to giving these temporary release to reduce the overcrowding in prisons in view of the experience with this disease to date in congregated settings and the risk it poses to prisoners and staff alike; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6809/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 491 and 492 together.

As the Deputy will appreciate, Covid-19 provides unique challenges to custodial institutions, including our prisons. Covid-19 in a prison setting would present significant challenges for prison management in terms of controlling the spread of the virus amongst staff and prisoners, and the provision of appropriate medical treatment to affected persons and the maintenance of staffing levels.

A significant amount of work has been carried out by the Irish Prison Service to address this challenge, informed and guided by the advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and consistent with the prison specific guidance for the management of Covid-19 issued by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Council of Europe.

As the Deputy is aware, in March this year, I approved a number of actions to assist the Irish Prison Service to reduce the numbers of prisoners in custody, including the temporary release of low-risk prisoners, in order to ensure effective infection control measure were possible.

In the first instance, the approach adopted included granting temporary release to low risk prisoners who were serving sentences of less than 12 months for non-violent offences. Subsequently, prisoners assessed as low risk who had less than 6 months to serve were also granted temporary release from some prisons depending on the risks present.

I am informed that all prisoners granted temporary release were assessed on a case-by-case basis. The primary factor in the consideration of any prisoner for early release remains public safety and risks assessed included any convictions for domestic abuse, such as breach of barring orders which present significant risks at the present time. I am informed that, on 19 May 2020 there were 752 prisoners in custody with less than 6 months remaining on their sentence. It is important to note, however, that many of these prisoners will not be eligible for temporary release due to the nature of their offence, the risk to public safety or further charges pending which remand them to custody beyond the expiration of their current sentence.

20 May 2020

As a result of the measures taken, I am informed that an initial 470 prisoners were granted temporary release and that, since then, further periods of temporary release have been granted resulting in a total of over 600 prisoners receiving temporary release, including community return, since the outset of this pandemic. As the Deputy will appreciate, the size of the prison population changes on a daily basis, as new committals and remands are made by the courts and releases occur as prisoners reach the end of their sentences. However, I am informed by the Irish Prison Service that, due to the granting of temporary release and a reduced number of committals from the Courts, the prison population has reduced from 4,235 on 11 March 2020 to 3,763 on 20 May 2020. This represents a reduction of 472 or just over 11% over this period.

I am informed that the following table sets out the prison population and the number of prisoners on temporary release for dates within the period in 2019 and 2020 referred to by the Deputy.

Date	Total Prison Population	Number on Temporary Release
11 March 2019	3984	217
20 May 2019	3999	243
11 March 2020	4235	343
20 May 2020	3763	427

As the Deputy will appreciate, given the current number of prisoners in custody, the Irish Prison Service is not in a position to provide single cell accommodation to all prisoners. I am informed that single-cell occupancy across the system would result in a bed capacity of less than 3,000 and would not be possible to achieve without releasing sizeable numbers of prisoners considered to represent a threat to public safety. I am further informed that, in some cases, prisoners are housed together for reasons other than lack of capacity. I understand that family members and friends often elect or are assigned a shared cell. I am further informed that shared cell accommodation can in certain cases be very beneficial from a management point of view, particularly for those who are vulnerable and at risk of self-harm, and that there will always be a need for certain prisoners to be accommodated together.

I am informed that information regarding in-cell occupancy is collated by the Irish Prison Service on a quarterly basis. The data for the April Census is currently being finalised for publication. I am advised by the Irish Prison Service that the number of prisoners sharing cells has been reduced by 146 from 1,892 in January 2020 to 1,746 in April 2020.

The Deputy may be interested to note that this and a wide range of other statistical information is available on the website of the Irish Prison Service at www.irishprisons.ie

Departmental Correspondence

493. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality when a reply will issue to correspondence (details supplied) sent to him on 25 April 2020 in view of the urgent need for a detailed reply before a certain date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6810/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I am aware of the correspondence dated 25 April 2020 referred to by the Deputy, which raises a number of questions including in relation to potential legal proceedings.

As the Deputy will appreciate, I am not in a position to address an individual case in this

reply or to give further information in relation to the matter.

I can confirm, however, that the correspondence is receiving the necessary attention and a response will issue as soon as possible.

Deportation Orders

494. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality when revocation of a deportation order will take place in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6873/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The person concerned is the subject of a Deportation Order, signed on 29 September 2017, requiring them to remove themselves from the State and remain outside the State. The enforcement of the Deportation Order is a matter for the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB).

As previously advised, representations were received from the person concerned, pursuant to the provisions of Section 3(11) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), requesting that the Deportation Order be revoked and including information regarding their marriage. Following detailed consideration of the information submitted in support of the request, the Deportation Order was affirmed and notified to the person concerned by letter dated 27 November 2018. There is no outstanding correspondence or applications on file for this applicant.

Please note that the Registration Office Burgh Quay and all Registration Offices for non-Dublin residents operated by An Garda Síochána have temporarily closed due to COVID-19. Consequently, the requirement of an individual to present to GNIB at a registration office is temporarily suspended.

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.

Question No. 495 answered with Question No. 450.

Direct Provision System

496. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the measures that have been taken in direct provision centres to ensure that persons with suspected and confirmed cases of Covid-19 have adequate space to self-isolate. [6900/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): I am pleased to have this opportunity to provide you with an update on the full range of measures that we, the HSE and centre management are taking to support residents and staff in Direct Provision accommodation at this time.

We are doing everything that we can to protect the health and welfare of our residents and centre staff as well as that of the wider community. We are working closely with the HSE in doing so, and while the HSE advice has evolved over time, we have been assured by both it and the Office of the Chief Medical Officer that our approach is appropriate.

All accommodation centres are carefully following the guidelines for our centres that have been published by the HSE's Health Protection Surveillance Centre, which can be found on its website www.hpsc.ie. That guidance exists precisely because it is recognised that congregated settings such as Direct Provision centres present specific challenges in this pandemic.

Shared bedrooms and communal living space are provided in numerous settings. Similar arrangements apply in homeless and disability services and, indeed, in private rented accommodation.

The direction from the HSE is that during the COVID crisis non-family members sharing a room in Direct Provision centres are considered to be a household. As such, they should implement social distancing measures from other households, i.e. residents in other rooms, and self-isolate if displaying symptoms or if directed by the HSE. In such instances, we provide facilities for self-isolation both on and off-site.

The established procedure across all Centres where a person is suspected of having the virus or is confirmed as having the virus, is that, where advised by Public Health, they are moved to a dedicated offsite self-isolation facility. Supports are available for the duration of their period of isolation until such time as the HSE considers that they can safely return to their centre. My Department has opened four dedicated self-isolation facilities for residents in Dublin, Cork and Limerick, and Dundalk, with a total capacity of 299 rooms. Residents in these facilities have their own bedroom and their own bathroom.

Since the start of the year over 1,550 permanent and temporary Direct Provision bed spaces have been procured, including the dedicated new centres opened in Rosslare Harbour, Caheriveen and Tullamore.

We have relocated over 600 residents to support social and physical distancing in centres and cocooning measures for the most vulnerable. By doing this, we have ensured that no more than three single people are sharing a room in any of our centres. We intend to continue this policy when the crisis is over.

All residents aged 65 or older and those advised to the Department as having a serious medical illness have been cocooned due to their particular vulnerability to this virus.

We are communicating directly with centre managers and residents via regular newsletters, which can also be found on our website www.accommodationcentres.ie. The newsletters have provided practical information on implementing social and physical distancing at this time and promoted shared learning and best practice across our network of centres. Residents have also been made aware of the need for good hand hygiene and coughing/sneezing etiquette. Information and posters have been distributed to all centres and translations of public health information have also been provided. With Ramadan underway, we have also prepared and circulated information for centre managers and residents with practical supports on observing Ramadan during the current COVID restrictions.

During this time, centre managers have also been advised to increase the standard and frequency of cleaning throughout the centres, paying particular attention to communal areas. A regular supply of hand sanitiser for centres is in place and this is distributed to centres as required. Other PPE is distributed, as needed, and in line with the HPSC guidelines for its appropriate use in residential settings.

In partnership with the HSE and Safetynet, my Department has put in place a national clinical telephone service to provide public health advice to support centre staff. It is also being used to advise, support and work with locations where vulnerable groups are present relating to

the implementation of COVID-19 guidelines and measures.

Generally, residents of Centres are subject to the same current public health measures as the rest of the population, for example, the right to exercise within a 5km radius, attend medical appointments or to shop for food or other necessities as set out in Government guidelines. However, as with everyone else, where a public health issue arises, Public Health officials may advise that residents stay in their centre and restrict movement for a time while they monitor the situation.

Healthcare workers living in Direct Provision accommodation are eligible to apply for accommodation under the HSE's Temporary Accommodation Scheme announced on 10 April 2020. We are actively encouraging all healthcare workers living in our centres to apply for this temporary accommodation for their protection and that of other centre residents and staff. We have provided information, forms and guidance. We have also asked the NGO community to support this initiative and to help to bring it to the attention of residents through their support networks.

We will continue to work closely with the HSE and centre management during this time to protect the health and safety of all residents and staff as a priority.

Prison Staff

497. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of prison nurses that were recruited for the Irish Prison Service in 2019 and to date in 2020; and the number of prison nurses that left the Irish Prison Service during same period. [6901/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I am advised by the Irish Prison Service that staffing requirements are continuously monitored, and that vacancies can arise as a result of multiple factors including mobility, promotions and retirements.

I am informed that there are currently 131 serving nursing staff employed across the Irish Prison Service with a total of 16 vacancies which are in the process of being filled through a Prison Nurse recruitment campaign. In addition, I am advised that the Irish Prison Service also utilises the services of agency nurses to supplement vacancies in permanent posts for nurses across the service.

I am informed that there were no Prison Nurses recruited in 2019 and that a total of three Prison Nurses exited the service. I am further advised that, in 2020 to-date, the Irish Prison Service has recruited eleven Prison Nurses and that one Prison Nurse has left the service.

The Deputy may wish to note that 'Prison Nurses' have been employed by the Irish Prison Service since 2012, following the restructuring of nursing in the Irish Prison Service as a result of the Haddington Road Agreement. Prior to 2012, the Irish Prison Service employed the grade of 'Nurse Officer'.

For the sake of completeness, please find the information requested, for both Prison Nurses and Nurse Officers, in the following tables, furnished to me by the Irish Prison Service.

Recruited into the Irish Prison Service	2019	2020 (to-date)
Prison Nurses	0	11
Nurse Officers	0	0

Recruited into the Irish Prison Service	2019	2020 (to-date)
Total	0	11

Exited the Irish Prison Service	2019	2020 (To-date)
Prison Nurses	3	1
Nurse Officers	3	1
Total	6	2

Question No. 498 answered with Question No. 472.

Direct Provision System

499. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if his attention has been drawn to the fact that residents of a reception centre (details supplied) are reporting that residents testing both positive and negative for Covid-19 are sharing bathroom and other facilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6939/20]

500. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the measures in place to ensure that residents in direct provision centres testing both positive and negative for Covid-19 are not forced into sharing bathroom and other facilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6940/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 499 and 500 together.

I want to assure the Deputy that my Department is doing everything it can to protect the health and welfare of residents and staff in our accommodation centres, as well as that of the wider community. My Department is working closely with the HSE in doing so, and while the HSE advice has evolved over time, we have been assured by both it and the Office of the Chief Medical Officer that our approach is appropriate.

All centres are following the guidelines for our centres that have been published by the HSE's Health Protection Surveillance Centre. These are publicly available at its website www.hpsc.ie. That guidance exists precisely because it is recognised that congregated settings such as Direct Provision centres present specific challenges in this pandemic.

The established procedure across all our centres where a person is suspected of having the virus or is confirmed as having the virus, is that, where advised by Public Health, they are moved to a dedicated off-site self-isolation facility where they are cared for until such time as the HSE decides that they can safely return to their centre. My Department has opened four dedicated self-isolation facilities (in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Dundalk) with capacity for 299 people. Residents in these facilities have their own bedroom and their own bathroom.

Since the start of the year, over 1,550 permanent and temporary new Direct Provision beds have been procured including the new dedicated centres in Rosslare Harbour, Caherciveen and Tullamore. We have relocated over 600 residents to support social and physical distancing in centres and cocooning measures for the most vulnerable. By doing this, we have ensured that no more than three single people are sharing a room in any centre. We intend to continue this policy after the crisis. All residents over the age of 65 and those advised to the Department as

having a serious medical illness have been cocooned.

The Deputy is correct in saying that the facility in Baleskin is a reception centre rather than an accommodation (or Direct Provision) centre. Generally, new international protection applicants are initially accommodated in Baleskin before being allocated accommodation in one of our network of centres around the State. In Baleskin, applicants are offered health screening by a permanent onsite HSE medical team. All public health responses required in Baleskin at this time are being led by the HSE team. In line with our agreed policy with the HSE, anyone with a positive result, and their close contacts identified by contact tracing, are asked to isolate and the most appropriate setting for their needs is identified, be that on-site self-isolation or transferring to an off-site isolation facility. The HSE makes the decision on the appropriate location based on the medical needs of the individual.

There are currently approximately 310 residents being accommodated onsite in Baleskin, which has capacity for 537 residents. The current occupancy has been reduced to facilitate social and physical distancing requirements.

Direct Provision System

501. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the additional inspections of direct provision centres that have taken place specifically for Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6941/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): I can inform the Deputy that all accommodation centres under contract to my Department are subject to three unannounced inspections per annum: twice by officials from the Immigration Service of the Department and once by an independent company (QTS Limited).

As a result of the health and safety restrictions around COVID-19, it is not appropriate for inspections to be carried out at this time. Additionally, all centres are currently closed to any visitors to protect residents and staff. As soon as the HSE advises that it is appropriate to commence inspections again, relevant officials in the Immigration Service will resume this process. During this time, to ensure that we are in regular contact with our centres, a dedicated communications team within IPAS has been established. This team undertakes daily calls with all centre managers across our network of permanent and temporary centres. Feedback from these conversations is reflected in the newsletters circulated to all centre managers to promote shared learning and best practice. The daily calls also ensure that any issues or concerns can be raised without delay for appropriate resolution for the benefit of residents and staff. In addition, residents also have the option to contact IPAS staff directly via email and can also raise concerns with the Office of the Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Children.

Inspections in our accommodation centres look at a wide range of issues such as fire safety issues, food hygiene, food quality, information provision, general security and emergency details, child protection issues, provision of TV and Wi-Fi services, staff rosters and the upkeep of all communal areas and bedrooms. Any issue identified is communicated in writing to the contractor and the contractor is required to address any issue identified immediately. Officials from the Immigration Service follow up to ensure that relevant issues have been addressed.

All accommodation centres are carefully following the guidelines for our centres that have been published by the HSE's Health Protection Surveillance Centre, which can be found on its website www.hpsc.ie. That guidance exists precisely because it is recognised that congregated settings such as Direct Provision centres present specific challenges in this pandemic.

We are communicating directly with centre managers and residents via regular newsletters, which can also be found on our website www.accommodationcentres.ie. The newsletters have provided practical information on implementing social and physical distancing at this time and promoted shared learning and best practice across our network of centres. Residents have also been made aware of the need for good hand hygiene and coughing/sneezing etiquette. Information and posters have been distributed to all centres and translations of public health information have also been provided. With Ramadan underway, we have also prepared and circulated information for centre managers and residents with practical supports on observing Ramadan during the current COVID restrictions.

During this time, centre managers have also been advised to increase the standard and frequency of cleaning throughout the centres, paying particular attention to communal areas. A regular supply of hand sanitiser for centres is in place and this is distributed to centres as required. Other PPE is distributed, as needed, and in line with the HPSC guidelines for its appropriate use in residential settings.

In partnership with the HSE and Safetynet, my Department has put in place a national clinical telephone service to provide public health advice to support centre staff. It is also being used to advise, support and work with locations where vulnerable groups are present relating to the implementation of COVID-19 guidelines and measures.

Centres without independent living arrangements (where applicants can cook for themselves and their families) have been asked to implement staggered meal times or to provide takeaway facilities where canteens have been temporarily closed.

While inspections of accommodation centres cannot take place at this time, I hope that this information will provide you with some reassurance that we are continuing to work closely with the HSE and centre management during this time to protect the health and safety of all residents and staff as a priority.

Direct Provision System

502. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if safe alternative accommodation will be provided for persons living in direct provision centres; if urgent action will be taken to protect the health and well-being of the residents of the direct provision centre in Cahersiveen, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6971/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): I want to assure the Deputy that my Department is doing everything it can to protect the health and welfare of residents and staff in our accommodation centres, as well as that of the wider community. My Department is working closely with the HSE in doing so, and while the HSE advice has evolved over time, we have been assured by both it and the Office of the Chief Medical Officer that our approach is appropriate.

All centres are following the guidelines for our centres that have been published by the HSE’s Health Protection Surveillance Centre. These are publicly available at its website www.hpsc.ie. That guidance exists precisely because it is recognised that congregated settings such as Direct Provision centres present specific challenges in this pandemic.

The established procedure across all our centres where a person is suspected of having the virus or is confirmed as having the virus, is that, where advised by Public Health, they are moved to a dedicated off-site self-isolation facility where they are cared for until such time as the HSE decides that they can safely return to their centre. My Department has opened four

dedicated self-isolation facilities (in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Dundalk) with capacity for 299 people. Residents in these facilities have their own bedroom and their own bathroom.

Since the start of the year, over 1,550 permanent and temporary new Direct Provision beds have been procured including the new dedicated centres in Rosslare Harbour, Caherciveen and Tullamore. We have relocated over 600 residents to support social and physical distancing in centres and cocooning measures for the most vulnerable. By doing this, we have ensured that no more than three single people are sharing a room in any centre. We intend to continue this policy after the crisis. All residents over the age of 65 and those advised to the Department as having a serious medical illness have been cocooned.

More specifically in relation to the Skellig Accommodation Centre in Caherciveen, the Deputy will appreciate that this is a public health situation, the response to which is being led by HSE Public Health, as is appropriate. Where cases of Covid-19 arise in the community, the HSE's Outbreak Control Team (OCT) manage the response. In addition to health professionals, this OCT for the centre also includes representatives from my Department and from centre management.

In line with the agreed policy with the HSE, anyone from the centre with a positive COVID-19 result has been transferred to an offsite self-isolation facility where they are cared for until such time as the HSE considers that they can safely return to their centre. The advice for the remaining residents in the Skellig Accommodation Centre to quarantine is public health advice, provided by public health authorities. The HSE has confirmed that there should be no movement into or out of the centre at this time, unless directed by public health. The purpose of this HSE guidance is to protect the health of all residents, staff and the wider community.

There are currently 69 residents (including 9 children) onsite in the centre, which has capacity for 150 residents, and 56 bedrooms. Residents are a mix of single people and small sized families. All single residents have been offered their own bedroom and all bedrooms in the centre are en suite. Some residents have declined this offer and have indicated that they wish to self-isolate with their roommate as a family unit. We continue to encourage these residents to accept the offer of their own room at this time.

Guidance has been provided by the HSE to centre management on the enhanced cleaning arrangements required at this time including through an onsite visit by a HSE infection control specialist. This applies to bedrooms, corridors, staircases, the dining room, kitchen, laundry room, lift, public toilets and reception and public areas. This is being strictly adhered to by centre management and staff.

My Department is working closely with the HSE and centre management to provide additional supports for residents during this time. There is a HSE Community Development Worker onsite at the Centre seven days a week to monitor the health of residents. This person is supported by a wider healthcare team. Additional outdoor space has been opened up with some seating provided and, exercise equipment has been set up in the outdoor area for residents' use. This outdoor equipment has been installed with the knowledge and support of HSE public health, and will be operated under their direction for safe use.

The residents are currently provided with three meals and snacks daily. However, in line with the overall policy objectives for accommodation centres, the service provider plans to introduce independent living arrangements with cooking facilities for residents in the coming period. In the meantime, the chefs in the centre are working with the residents to find out about preferred meals and staff have been asked to source and provide ethnic snacks for residents. Kettles have been provided in rooms so that residents can make refreshments throughout the day rather than using communal facilities and meals are also being delivered to rooms. The

centre has a good Wi-Fi service and phone credit has also been provided for residents so that they can keep in touch with family and friends.

The current restrictions are especially difficult for children. In addition to the upgrades to the outdoor space, toys, puzzles and tablets have been being provided for children and laptops have also been provided for residents' use. The Tusla official seconded to work with my Department to see what additional supports they need and to discuss any concerns they might have.

Officials from my Department began virtual clinics with residents earlier this week and a telephone support service for residents is also being established with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS).

The Deputy can be assured that my Department, the HSE and centre managers will continue to work closely together during this time to protect the health and safety of all residents and staff of accommodation centres as a priority.

National LGBTI+ Strategy

503. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the amount of additional funding that has been made available to LGBTI+ community services for 2020 in line with action 6.2 of the National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019–2021 (details supplied); the breakdown of the additional funding provided to each LGBTI+ community service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6975/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): On 9 October 2019, I announced that additional funding for LGBTI+ initiatives of €0.7m over the 2019 provision had been made available in Budget 2020 to support implementation of the LGBTI+ Strategy in 2020.

A Committee is being appointed to oversee the implementation of the Strategy and details of its membership will soon be announced.

In line with the commitments in the National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy, my Department has commenced work on a mapping of LGBTI+ community services. A scheme of grants to support the sustainability of LGBTI+ community services is also in preparation. It is hoped to be in a position to launch this scheme this autumn; the details of the scheme will be published in advance.

National LGBTI+ Strategy

504. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if a progress report on action 21.1 of the National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019–2021 will be provided (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6976/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): As the Deputy may be aware, my Department is working to update Ireland's criminal law on both hate speech and hate crime as a priority.

Currently, the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act 1989 prohibits threatening, abusive or insulting conduct that is intended or likely to stir up hatred against a group of persons on account of their sexual orientation, race, colour, nationality, religion, ethnic or national origins, or membership of the travelling community. In addition, a hate motive may be considered by

sentencing judges as an aggravating factor increasing the sentence imposed, where a person has been found guilty of a crime such as assault.

A comprehensive public consultation has been carried out to assist in this process of updating the law in this area. This has included a public survey and an opportunity for stakeholders to make formal submissions. This consultation has been carried out to ensure that the Department fully understands the lived experience of those impacted by hate speech and hate crime as well as the views of professionals and other stakeholders in the field, so that the laws developed are robust, clearly understood and effective in dealing with unacceptable incidents.

There has been strong engagement by the public with this topic. The Department has received in the region of 3,800 written responses to the consultation, including approximately 175 detailed written submissions.

In parallel, my Department has carried out comparative research on international best practice on hate crime legislation. This research is currently being finalised and is expected to be published shortly.

My officials are analysing all of these materials, as well as other relevant legal and policy information, to ensure that any legislative proposals which are made are evidence-based, proportionate and effective, while respecting freedom of expression.

There will be a further opportunity for stakeholders to share their views when the legislative proposals on this important issue are published for discussion.

I am confident that the approach being taken - including research and providing the opportunity for experts and members of the public to contribute their expertise and experience - will help to ensure that the legislation will deliver a safer, fairer and more inclusive Ireland for everyone, including members of the LGBTI+ community, now as well as into the future.

More generally, the Deputy may wish to be aware that a Committee is being appointed to oversee the implementation of the Strategy and details of its membership will soon be announced. In addition and in line with the commitments in the National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy, my Department has commenced work on a mapping of LGBTI+ community services. A scheme of grants to support the sustainability of such services is also in preparation. It is hoped to be in a position to launch this scheme this autumn; the details of the scheme will be published in advance.

Child Abuse

505. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of child sexual abuse referrals received by An Garda Síochána from Tusla in each of the years 2016 to 2019; the number investigated; the number deemed to be unfounded and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6983/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): Under Section 26 of the Garda Síochána Act 2005 the Garda Commissioner is responsible for carrying on and managing and controlling generally the administration and business of An Garda Síochána. In addition, the investigation of suspected crimes is an operational matter within the responsibility of the Commissioner and not for me as Minister.

The information requested is currently being compiled and I will write to the Deputy directly when it is available.

Naturalisation Applications

506. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of applications for naturalisation being processed; the number that are over 24 months in process since the application was first submitted; the way in which the statutory requirement that the applicant be of good character differs in substance from the vetting process carried out by An Garda Síochána here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6986/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I can inform the Deputy that the number of citizenship applications currently being processed is 17,954 of which 3,629 are 24 months or more in the process i.e. 20% approx.

Any person may apply for Irish citizenship through the naturalisation process, providing they satisfy the statutory conditions for naturalisation. The Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956 as amended provides that the Minister may, in his absolute discretion, grant an application for a certificate of naturalisation if satisfied the applicant satisfies the statutory conditions which are that the applicant must –

- Be of full age or be a minor born in the State;
- Be of good character;
- Have had a period of 1 year’s continuous residency in the State immediately before the date of application and, during the 8 years immediately preceding that period, have had a further total residence in the State amounting to 4 years (5 years in total);
- Intend in good faith to continue to reside in the State after naturalisation; and
- Have made a declaration of fidelity to the nation and loyalty to the State and undertaken to faithfully observe the laws of the State and to respect its democratic values.

All applicants for a certificate of naturalisation aged 16 years and older are subject to a criminal records check carried out by the National Vetting Bureau of An Garda Síochána. This is an essential step in the process.

An applicant’s good character is assessed in a number of ways; including but not limited to:

- An Garda Síochána vetting;
- Home Country Police clearance; and
- Adherence to the laws and regulations of the State, including regarding revenue matters, social welfare matters and in relation to driving offences.

It should also be noted that everyone’s case is different, for example, many applicants provide dog licences as an indication as to their adherence to the laws of the land, whereas others provide fishing licences and permits. An increasing number of applicants provide tax clearance certificates. In fact, my Department officials and the Revenue Commissioners have collaborated on making this process easier by the provision of a Citizenship e-tax clearance selection within the drop down list on the Revenue website. Accordingly, the good character assessment cannot be captured in a prescriptive list, rather the entirety of the case will be assessed on its own merits.

Other applicants, in addition to providing evidence of their adherence to the rules of the State, go further and provide evidence as to their active contribution to their communities. This can take many forms including letters from members of their communities relating to their in-

volvement in their communities, e.g. volunteering on schools committees, local development committees, fund raising, volunteering in charities, faith communities, sports and social organisations, etc. These acts of active Citizenship are to be commended. However, my officials fully understand that everyone's circumstances are different and applicants may not be in a position to be active in their communities for various reasons.

I'm sure the Deputy would agree that the rich tapestry of a person's interactions with the State and their involvement in community life is unique to the individual and is not something that lends itself to a rigidly prescriptive list.

As the Deputy may be aware, the next scheduled citizenship ceremony due to take place in the INEC in Killarney in July 2020 has unfortunately been postponed due to the current restrictions. I have instructed my officials to examine feasible mechanisms and processes whereby procedures such as citizenship ceremonies can take place while fully complying with the criteria outlined in the Government Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

Furthermore, the Deputy may be aware of a challenge taken in the High Court last year by an applicant who was refused a certificate of naturalisation due to his absences from the State during the last year continuous prior to the date of his application. The outcome of this ruling – which was subsequently successfully appealed to the Court of Appeal – resulted in significant delays to the processing of naturalisation applications last year.

The restrictions attendant to the current COVID-19 pandemic have regrettably resulted in significant challenges to the delivery of normal services. As a result of these restrictions, the Citizenship Division of Immigration Service Delivery, along with many other public and private sector organisations is experiencing significant disruption in delivering its core functions. Working within these restrictions, public safety and the wellbeing of staff are of course both urgent priorities.

I can assure the Deputy that the matter is receiving ongoing attention and as soon as a practical plan is in place for the re-commencement of normal service delivery, notifications will be placed on our website (www.inis.gov.ie).

Direct Provision System

507. Deputy Cian O'Callaghan asked the Minister for Justice and Equality when State owned direct provision centres will be converted to independent living centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6994/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): I can inform the Deputy that the Office of Public Works (OPW) is responsible for all maintenance and improvement works in the seven State-owned accommodation centres for persons seeking International Protection. Independent living has been introduced in one of these centres, in Athlone, which has a capacity of 300 persons.

My Department has been in discussions with the OPW regarding the required works to introduce independent living in the remaining six centres and design works has commenced. My Department in partnership with the OPW will seek to progress these works at the earliest opportunity.

As the Deputy will appreciate, in light of the current situation and the Government restrictions on indoor construction work, it is not currently possible to provide a timetable for these works.

Departmental Contracts

508. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the amount spent on external consultants by his Department in 2019; the average hourly rate; if caps or limits on such spending are in place; the way in which conflicts of interest are managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7285/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I wish to advise the Deputy that the information sought cannot be provided in the time allowed. As soon as the information has been collated I will write to the Deputy on the matter.

Covid-19 Pandemic

509. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when a dog grooming business from home can resume (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5565/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government’s Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15th May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18th. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government’s website gov.ie.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes

the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/> .

On 8th May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30th June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to flex the plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Covid-19 Pandemic

510. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if consideration will be given to allow cinemas to reopen on 3 July 2020 as part of phase 3 (details supplied). [5652/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15th May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18th. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHEET). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary

for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

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The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 8th May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30th June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country. I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Covid-19 Pandemic

511. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the phase in the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business in which dog grooming businesses would be allowed to reopen. [5790/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The

Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15th May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18th . This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

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The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie .

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/> .

On 8th May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30th June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and

clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to flex the plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Covid-19 Pandemic

512. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will examine proposals (details supplied); and if consideration will be given to allowing cinemas reopen sooner under the proposals. [5809/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15th May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18th. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

I have not had direct discussions with cinemas. However, I have regular engagement with the various business representative groups through my Department's Enterprise Forum on Covid-19 and the Retail Consultation Forum both of which I Chair. I will continue to maintain that dialogue with stakeholders so that we can work towards getting people back to work safely.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

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In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/> .

On 8th May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30th June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country. I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Covid-19 Pandemic

513. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if consideration will be given to expediting the opening dates for hairdressers that can implement a safety protocol to protect their customers and staff from the spread of Covid-19 [5818/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government’s Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

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Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of

their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

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Covid-19 Pandemic

514. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to ensure couples do not lose deposits if a wedding is cancelled due to restrictions; if

hotels must refund couples amounts paid or expected if weddings are cancelled as a result of restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5823/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The restrictions introduced to limit the spread of Covid-19 have led to the cancellation or deferral of many events and services, including wedding receptions. In many cases where it is not possible to proceed with a wedding reception due to these restrictions, the couple and the hotel will be able to agree on an alternative date and the question of a refund will not arise.

Where a couple have placed a deposit with a hotel or other wedding venue, they have entered into a contract with the hotel or venue concerned. Whether a couple are entitled to a refund of their deposit where it is not possible to reschedule the wedding will depend in the first instance on the terms and conditions of their contract. Couples who find themselves in this situation should first check the terms and conditions of their contract with the hotel or venue, and in particular the terms relating to cancellations and the refund of deposits and other pre-payments. If a term of the contract provides for the refund of deposits in the event of a cancellation, the business may not subsequently change that term without the consumer's agreement. While I fully appreciate that hotels are facing severe financial pressures at present, they should deal fairly with consumers who find it necessary to cancel contracts for weddings or other functions and are seeking a refund of their deposits.

The terms of standard form contracts of the kind that typically govern weddings and other functions are subject to assessment for unfairness under the Regulations on unfair terms in consumer contracts. The aim of the Regulations is to protect consumers against the abuse of power by sellers and suppliers, in particular by means of one-sided contract terms. The Regulations provide for example that among the terms that may be regarded as unfair are terms that permit sellers or suppliers to retain sums paid by the consumer where the latter decides not to perform the contract without providing for the consumer to receive compensation of an equivalent amount from the seller or supplier where the latter is the party cancelling the contract. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC) is responsible for the enforcement of the provisions of the Regulations on the control of unfair terms in standard form consumer contracts. Information on matters relating to consumer contracts, including on cancellations and refunds for wedding and other contracts, can be accessed on the CCPC website at <https://www.ccpc.ie/consumers/covid-19/consumer-contracts/> .

The enormous disruption to commercial activity caused by Covid-19 has thrown up many difficult situations for consumers and businesses. If current consumer law proves not to have provided adequate protection for consumers in these situations, I will consider and, where justified, bring forward proposals to strengthen that law where I can do so without contravening EU consumer protection legislation. Later this year I will publish the Scheme of a comprehensive, consolidated Consumer Rights Bill that will set out rights and remedies for consumer contracts for goods, services, digital content and will include proposals to strengthen the existing provisions on unfair terms in consumer contracts. This Bill will provide an opportunity to address any gaps in consumer protection revealed by the application by businesses of the terms of consumer contracts in cases arising from Covid-19.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

515. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the measures in place for employees in receipt of the wage subsidy scheme in which an employer is not topping up pay and employees are being instructed to work full-time for a reduced take home pay which results in a payment below the minimum wage; and if she will

make a statement on the matter. [5869/20]

527. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the measures in place for employees in receipt of the wage subsidy scheme in cases in which the employer is not topping up their pay and they are being instructed to work full-time for reduced take home pay which could result in them receiving payment below the minimum wage; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6659/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 515 and 527 together.

The National Minimum Wage Act 2000 is a policy matter for the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. The Workplace Relations Commission (WRC), an independent statutory office under the aegis of my Department, is responsible for the enforcement of, inter alia, compliance with minimum rates of remuneration in workplaces.

Except for the employment of close relatives and registered industrial apprentices, the National Minimum Wage Act applies to all individuals engaged under a contract of employment. Failure to pay the national minimum hourly rate of pay is a criminal offence, punishable upon summary conviction, by a fine not exceeding €2,500 or imprisonment not exceeding 6 months or both.

An individual who considers that they are not being paid in accordance with the National Minimum Wage Act 2000 may refer the matter to a WRC inspector for investigation. Inspectors are authorised to inspect records and to ensure compliance by employers with the provisions of the National Minimum Wage Act 2000.

Separately, an employee not in receipt of the national minimum hourly rate of pay may also refer a complaint for investigation to a WRC Adjudication Officer. The complaint form for referral of a complaint is available on the WRC website www.workplacerelements.ie.

Further information for both employers and employees is available from the WRC Information and Customer Services telephone service (Tel 1890 80 80 90) open 9.30 am to 05.00 pm - Monday to Friday.

Covid-19 Pandemic

516. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will meet with representatives of cinema operators to ensure that reopening of cinemas occurs at the right time and with the right procedures. [6044/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15th May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18th. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that

can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

I have not met with the representatives of cinema operators. However, I have regular engagement with the various business representative groups through my Department's Enterprise Forum on Covid-19 and the Retail Consultation Forum both of which I Chair. I will continue to maintain that dialogue with stakeholders so that we can work towards getting people back to work safely.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbej.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbej.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 8th May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30th June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the

circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Future Growth Loan Scheme

517. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to roll out additional funds for the SBCI future growth loan scheme in view of the fact it is maxed out through the pillar banks; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6055/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Future Growth Loan Scheme currently makes up to €300 million of loans available with a term of 8-10 years and is operated by the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) through participating lenders. We have seen strong demand for the scheme since its launch in April 2019, resulting in a rapid take up of the scheme. Funding made available by the scheme facilitates long-term, strategic investment.

The scheme is open to eligible SMEs and small mid-caps (businesses of up to 499 employees), including those in the primary agriculture and seafood sectors. Loans under the scheme range from €100,000 (€50,000 for farmers) to €3m per eligible business, with loans of up to €500,000 available unsecured. The initial maximum interest rate is capped at 4.5% for loans up to €249,999 and 3.5% for loans more than or equal to €250,000 for the first six months.

As at 11 May 2020, the scheme has received 3,502 eligibility applications, with 3,327 approved, 160 currently in process and 16 deemed ineligible. The initial €300m funding for the Future Growth Loan Scheme has been almost fully subscribed, supporting a significant level of strategic investment by businesses. One of the participating finance providers lenders has remaining lending capacity and businesses seeking loan approval under the scheme are being directed towards this lender.

On 8 April 2020, I announced that the Future Growth Loan Scheme would be significantly expanded by a further €200m to facilitate longer-term lending to Covid-19-impacted businesses.

Officials of my Department are engaging with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Department of Finance and the SBCI, as well as the European Investment Fund, to bring this funding to market as soon as possible, as I am conscious that Covid-19 has been a significant disruption for many businesses.

Future Growth Loan Scheme

518. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if legislation is needed in order for the pillar banks to issue loans under the SBCI future growth loan scheme. [6056/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Future Growth Loan Scheme (FGLS) was launched in April of 2019 and makes available a fund of up to €300m to eligible Irish businesses to fund strategic, long-term investment. The scheme was developed by my Department in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. It leverages a guarantee from the European Investment Fund (EIF) and is operated by the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) through participating finance

providers.

The scheme has been well received, and as at 8 May there have been 3,502 applications for eligibility under the scheme, of which 3,327 have been approved. The strong uptake of the scheme has meant that the initial funding of €300m has now been almost fully subscribed. To date, 1,045 applicants have progressed to sanction under the scheme.

On 8 April, I announced a €200 million expansion to the scheme.

The FGLS is underpinned by a 64% counter-guarantee from the European Investment Fund. This counter-guarantee provides significant risk protection to the Exchequer against potential losses from the loan guarantee scheme. The FGLS was established using the European Investment Fund Agreement Act 2018. This Act allows for the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation and the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to enter into agreements with the European Investment Fund (EIF) to facilitate access to finance for qualifying enterprises.

There is a limit of €75 million set out in the Act on the total value of agreements (for First Loss payments) that the relevant Ministers can enter into with the EIF. Capacity currently remains within the aggregate limit set out in the Act to allow for an agreement with the EIF in relation to the planned €200m expansion of the FGLS. Officials of my Department, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Department of Finance, and the SBCI are working to ensure this is available as soon as possible.

However, the European Investment Bank (EIB) Group recently announced, as part of the European Union response to COVID-19, that it would be providing €25 billion in guarantees to underpin €200 billion in funding for member States to mitigate against COVID-19. For Ireland to be able to enter into additional agreements with the EIF, so as to leverage these EIB guarantees, will require an amendment to the aggregate limit set out in the European Investment Fund Agreement Act 2018.

So, while there is no legislation required to allow the pillar banks to issue loans under the Future Growth Loan Scheme, legislation changes would be required for further expansions of the FGLS beyond that which I have already announced.

Officials of my Department have been working urgently alongside the Office of Parliamentary Counsel on the drafting of legislation to amend the aggregate limit for agreements within the European Investment Fund Agreement Act 2018. The intention is that it will be progressed through the Oireachtas as a matter of urgency once a new Government is formed.

Future Growth Loan Scheme

519. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she, in partnership with the European Union European Fund for Strategic Investments and the SBCI, will further guarantee bank loans to SMEs under the future growth loan scheme; if this requires legislation to provide additional guarantees; and if so, the estimated timeline for same. [6057/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Future Growth Loan Scheme currently makes up to €300 million of loans available with a term of 8-10 years and is operated by the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) through participating lenders. Funding made available by the scheme facilitates long-term, strategic investment.

As at 8 May 2020, the scheme has received 3,502 eligibility applications, with 3,327 approved, 160 currently in process and 16 deemed ineligible. The scheme has seen significant uptake and the initial €300m funding has been almost fully subscribed, supporting a significant level of strategic investment by businesses. On 2 May, I announced an expansion to the Future Growth Loan Scheme of €200m. Officials of my Department, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Department of Finance, and the SBCI are working to ensure this is available as soon as possible.

The scheme is underpinned by a 64% counter-guarantee from the European Investment Fund. This counter-guarantee provides significant risk protection to the Exchequer against potential losses from the loan guarantee scheme. The FGLS was established using the European Investment Fund Agreement Act 2018. This Act allows for the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation and the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to enter into agreements with the European Investment Fund (EIF) to facilitate access to finance for qualifying enterprises.

There is a limit of €75 million set out in the Act on the total value of agreements (for First Loss payments) that the relevant Ministers can enter into with the EIF. Capacity currently remains within the aggregate limit set out in the Act to allow for an agreement with the EIF in relation to the planned €200m expansion of the FGLS.

However, the European Investment Bank (EIB) Group recently announced, as part of the European Union response to COVID-19, that it would be providing €25 billion in guarantees to underpin €200 billion in funding for member States to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. For Ireland to be able to enter into additional agreements with the EIF, so as to leverage these EIB guarantees, will require an amendment to the aggregate limit set out in the European Investment Fund Agreement Act 2018.

Officials of my Department have been working urgently alongside the Office of Parliamentary Counsel on the drafting of legislation to amend the aggregate limit for agreements within the European Investment Fund Agreement Act 2018. The intention is that it will be progressed through the Oireachtas as a matter of urgency once a new Government is formed.

Workplace Safety

520. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the guidance published to date in relation to workplace health and safety standards specifically in relation to Covid-19; if the guidance will be updated prior to 18 May 2020 when many businesses are set to reopen; if the guidance is legally enforceable; if not, if it takes the form of recommendations; the protections being proposed for workers that may be forced to work in an inappropriate manner; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6089/20]

584. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the guidance published to date from the Health and Safety Authority or the National Standards Authority of Ireland in relation to workplace health and safety standards specifically in relation to Covid-19; if the guidance will be updated prior to 18 May 2020 when many businesses are set to reopen; if the guidance is legally enforceable; if not, if it will take the form of recommendations; the protections being proposed for workers that may be forced to work in an inappropriate manner; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6090/20]

585. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if the Health and Safety Authority or the National Standards Authority of Ireland will be con-

ducting reviews, inspections or certifications for businesses reopening once certain Covid-19 restrictions will be lifted; the legal protections there will be for both employees and customers if recommendations from the HSA and the NSAI are not adhered to; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6091/20]

586. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if primary legislation will be required to place Covid-19 guidance from the HSA and the NSAI on a legal footing; if the recommendations as published are legally enforceable for employers that fail to comply with same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6092/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 520 and 584 to 586, inclusive, together.

As the Deputy will be aware, I launched the national “Return to Work Safely Protocol” Saturday, 9 May 2020. The Protocol was drafted in close consultation with the social partners under the auspices of the Labour and Employer Economic Forum and agreed with them.

The Protocol sets out a clear compliance framework designed for all places of work which will ensure that businesses can reopen safely and that workers can feel safe returning to work. The Protocol is a living document which will evolve with changing with Public Health advice.

Under the Health, Safety and Welfare at Work Act, 2005, the HSA has full powers to oversee compliance with the health, safety and wellbeing of workers in their place of work. While COVID-19 is a public health issue, the infectious nature of the virus and the way in which it is easily transmitted through human contact, makes it a workplace health and safety issue as well as a general health matter. Neither health, safety nor welfare are narrowly defined in the 2005 Act, so the HSA has all of the powers that it needs.

Section 27 of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 2005 prohibits an employer from penalising or threatening to penalise an employee with respect to any terms or condition of his/her employment, where the employee is exercising any right under safety and health legislation. The enforcement of the Section 27 of the Health and Safety Act is a matter for the Workplace Relations Commission.

In relation to the National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI) this body does not have legal enforcement powers in relation to occupational safety and health. However, the NSAI has developed very useful guidance for businesses in the context of operating safely taking account of the range of COVID-19 public health measures. The NSAI has published three guidance documents;

- COVID-19 Workplace Protection and Improvement Guide
- COVID-19 Retail Protection and Improvement Guide
- Guidance on Manufacturing and Importing PPE and Medical Devices

Further sectoral guidance will be considered as the Roadmap progresses. Separately, the Health and Safety Authority is currently preparing to publish a range of follow-on supports for businesses/employers as well as workers/worker representatives. These include:

- Checklist for Employers with details on control measures, induction etc.
- Checklist for workers
- Checklist for Worker Representative

- Templates for Return to Work Form/Covid Response Plan

Phase 1 of the reopening of the economy began on Monday last and, the HSA and other inspectors are out there advising and guiding employers on how to respect the Protocol. Helping businesses to comply is the overall goal of the HSA. However if, following an inspection, the inspector forms the opinion that further action is required, the appropriate action, up to and including the closure of a workplace, will be taken using the relevant powers. Where relevant, the public health authorities will be involved

Tattooing and Body Piercing Regulation

521. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she has had contact with the tattoo industry in relation to when it can reopen under Covid-19 restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6111/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15th May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18th . This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

I have not met with the tattoo industry. However, I have regular engagement with the various business representative groups through my Department's Enterprise Forum on Covid-19 and the Retail Consultation Forum both of which I Chair. I will continue to maintain that dialogue with stakeholders so that we can work towards getting people back to work safely.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie .

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/> .

On 8th May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30th June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Health and Safety Inspections

522. Deputy Brian Stanley asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if the HSA will carry out inspections of all meat plants here. [6188/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The inspection of workplaces and any actions arising from inspections are, in the first instance, an operational matter for the Health and Safety Authority. In deciding to carry out a workplace inspection, the Health and Safety Authority consider a number of factors, including receipt of complaints in relation to practices at a place of work.

I understand that a Health Service Executive led National Outbreak Control Team for COVID-19 outbreaks in meat processing plants is in place and it reports to the Health Protection Surveillance Centre. This national outbreak control team has input from professionals in public health, environmental health, occupational health, health & safety and animal health. To date the Health and Safety Authority has participated in two National OCT meetings. The Health and Safety Authority, based on their engagements, with the National OCT are preparing to prioritise and inspect some meat factories based on the information made available by the Public Health experts regarding COVID-19 outbreaks in meat factories.

In general the Health and Safety Authority carries out a mix of unannounced inspections, along with providing advice and information through the HSA Workplace Contact Unit email

and phonenumber. Any concerns about potential breaches of occupational safety and health legislation at a specific place of work and/or in regard to adherence with the provisions of the national Return to Work Safely Protocol should be brought to the attention of the Health and Safety Authority by contacting its Workplace Contact Unit at wcu@hsa.ie and Tel: 1890 289 389.

Insurance Industry

523. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will address a matter regarding support for credit insurance companies (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6448/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am aware of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on all businesses and this includes the private trade credit insurance market.

As a result of the significant economic shock, there is increased uncertainty regarding the financial performance of many companies in our economy. I understand that the trade credit insurance companies have had to adjust their coverage in response to this adverse economic environment.

In response the Government has already introduced a range of measures and supports to the economy in order to sustain and over time facilitate a return to a more normal trading environment. This in turn should permit the trade credit market to reconsider the risk environment and adjust their coverage as appropriate.

My Department continues to consider further options for appropriate and effective assistance to businesses and this includes the possibility of supports to ensure the continued provision of credit insurance and the appropriate mechanism to do so.

My officials are engaging with the private trade credit insurance providers to determine whether specific support can be provided to this market and how this could complement other general supports provided by the Government.

This support will be considered as part of the range of measures provided to businesses.

This is an ongoing process.

Podiatry Services

524. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when podiatry and chiropody services will be fully resumed [6475/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15th May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap

from Monday May 18th . This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie .

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/> .

On 8th May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30th June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to flex the plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

525. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if businesses in arrears for local authority rates for 2019 will be able to avail of the grant by way of the rebate of rates; the way in which the grant will work; the person or body that will administer the grant; the qualifying conditions for same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6618/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): On Friday, May 15th 2020 the Government agreed details of the new €250m Restart Grant, which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures.

The Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30th June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers.

The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, or a minimum payment of €2,000, whichever is the higher, and a maximum payment of €10,000. Those businesses with outstanding rates bills are also eligible to make an application if they meet the criteria.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online to local authorities from Friday 22nd May. Processing of applications and payment of the Restart Grant will depend on the initial surge of applications but, as far as is feasible, will be prioritised according to scheduled reopening dates in the national Roadmap.

To avail of the Restart Grant, a business must be in the Local Authorities Commercial Rates Payment System and:

- have an annual turnover of less than €5m and employ between 1 to 50 people;
- have closed and/or suffered a projected 25%+ loss in turnover to end June 2020;
- commit to remain open or to reopen if it was closed;
- declare the intention to retaining employees that are on The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) and to reemploy staff on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment where applicable.

The grant can be used to defray ongoing fixed costs, for replenishing stock and for measures needed to ensure employee and customer safety.

This direct grant support is part of the wider €12bn package of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs.

Covid-19 Pandemic

526. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the reason cinemas are scheduled to reopen in phase 5 which is later than cafés, restaurants, museums and galleries; if she has had direct discussions with cinemas in relation to the reopening date of same; the measures they can implement to ensure safe social distancing; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6632/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15th May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18th . This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

I have not had direct discussions with cinemas. However, I have regular engagement with the various business representative groups through my Department's Enterprise Forum on Covid-19 and the Retail Consultation Forum both of which I Chair. I will continue to maintain that dialogue with stakeholders so that we can work towards getting people back to work safely.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie .

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/> .

On 8th May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30th June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019,

with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to change its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Question No. 527 answered with Question No. 515.

Brexit Data

528. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the projected cost to trade in the event of a failure to agree a trade agreement between the European Union and the UK; the projected cost by sector; if she will provide a comparison of the projected cost of no trade agreement compared to an agreement with no tariffs and quotas; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6722/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): It is the case that Brexit, in whatever shape it finally takes, will have significant implications for the Irish economy and will fundamentally change the nature of the trading relationship for Irish businesses trading with the UK.

In order to better understand the economic impacts of Brexit, my Department has conducted extensive research on a wide range of Brexit related issues affecting Irish businesses since the result of the UK referendum in 2016.

Of particular interest to the Deputy is a 2018 study entitled “Strategic Implications for Ireland arising from changing EU-UK trading relations” a comprehensive and independent expert study that my Department commissioned from Copenhagen Economics. The study examined the implications of Brexit for the Irish economy and trade, quantifying the impact of possible new barriers to trade which might emerge as a result of Brexit.

The study also provided analysis of the likely impact of Brexit on key sectors of the Irish economy. Five sectors were identified that account for 90% of the impact and these are: Agriculture, Pharma-chemicals, Electrical Machinery, Wholesale & Retail, and Air Transport. The rise of non-tariff barriers due to regulatory divergence is the main factor driving the results as opposed to the imposition of the tariff regimes of the EU and the UK on their respective imports/goods.

This analysis was undertaken on the basis of no policy action being taken although this of course is not the case given the extensive Brexit mitigation actions put in place across Government and across all sectors of the economy in the past few years.

All of the scenarios examined in the 2018 study produce a result that is less favourable than a non-Brexit scenario. The scenarios considered reflected four of the possible outcomes from

the future relationship between the EU and the UK – an EEA scenario, a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), a Customs Union, or a worst-case, no trade deal, WTO scenario.

The WTO scenario was found to have the most negative impact on the Irish economy gradually reducing GDP growth by 7% by 2030; an EEA scenario would be least damaging gradually reducing GDP growth by 2.8% by 2030. The study found that regardless of the scenario modelled, the Irish economy was still expected to record strong, positive growth out to 2030. Brexit would have a dampening impact, however, resulting in a lower growth rate than would otherwise have occurred.

Following the adoption of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Revised Political Declaration (RPD) on the Future Relationship between the EU and the UK last year, my Department undertook further Brexit analysis with Copenhagen Economics. Under this latest study, two additional scenarios for a Free Trade Agreement were examined to take account of the provisions of the RPD published in January 2020. This latest study is also available on my Department's website at www.dbei.gov.ie.

Overall, the findings from this study suggest that a Brexit outcome based on the RPD is likely to reduce Irish GDP by between 3.2% and 3.9% by 2030 compared with a baseline where the UK remains a member of the EU. This compares to a negative impact of 7% in the no deal (WTO basis) modelled in the previous Copenhagen Economics study.

In response to the various Brexit analysis and studies undertaken across Government I have, over the course of the last three budgets put in place through the enterprise agencies, an extensive suite of enterprise supports to assist businesses to meet the challenges presented by Brexit. They range from liquidity support through short-term and long-term loans, to restructuring aid for businesses in severe operating difficulties. The majority of enterprise supports are open to all businesses, including SMEs, and not just those that are clients of the enterprise agencies.

Of course most recently businesses have been beset by the huge challenges that COVID-19 has brought about. Government has responded swiftly by making available a myriad of supports to help businesses deal with the crisis presented by this pandemic.

As we begin the phased reopening of the economy this week in line with the Government's COVID-19 recovery plan, I am acutely aware too that businesses must not lose sight of the Brexit-related challenges that remain. This is particularly highlighted by the challenging negotiations that are currently ongoing between the EU and the UK to reach an agreement on the future trading relationship, and the ever-present danger of a no trade deal scenario.

As our economy recovers post the Covid-19 pandemic, I encourage businesses more than ever to avail of the Government supports that are widely available. Full details are available on my Department's website at www.dbei.gov.ie

Covid-19 Pandemic

529. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when dog grooming can resume under the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7059/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while

balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday 18 May. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website GOV.ie.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate. The Protocol is available at <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>. The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 8 May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30 June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to flex the plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research

that emerges from other sources.

Departmental Contracts

530. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if her Department has engaged the use of external consultants from 1 January 2020 to date; the details and costs of such engagements; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5523/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department considers hiring external consultants in cases where there is not the necessary expertise to deliver the project in-house, in cases where an external assessment is deemed essential, or in cases where a project must be completed within a short time scale, and although the expertise or experience may be available in-house, performing the task would involve a prohibitive opportunity cost.

My Department complies with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's guidelines for engagements of consultants by the civil service, having regard to public procurement guidelines.

The following table outlines the details of projects for which external consultants have been engaged by my Department since 1 January 2020.

Consultant Engaged Since 1st January 2020	Project Title	Value of Contract
Implement Consulting Group	Economic and Sustainability Impact Assessment for Ireland of the EU-Mercosur Agreement	€199,500, plus VAT
M.CO	Consultancy Services for the Scoping of Options for a National Design Centre for Digital, Project and Strategic Design	€64,350 plus VAT
Behaviour & Attitudes	Telephone and online survey of Business Capability and Capacity to Implement Covid-19 Prevention Measures	€24,000 (estimate)
Ward	Security report for ECP2 - TME-filng	€8,986
Ward	Security report for ECP2 – Eser-vices	€9,570
Crowe Ireland	An Analysis of the Collaborative Economy in Ireland from an Enterprise Perspective	€74,970 + VAT
Sadhbh McGrath	Legal Research Services for Consumer Rights Bill	€2,240
EY	Safeguarding of Audit Capacity	€40,000
Coyne Research	Customer Survey	€7,749

Covid-19 Pandemic

531. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she

has considered allowing phased opening of shopping centres with a small number of outlets opening gradually, beginning with the smaller shops; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5580/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business has been published by Government and is available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/e5e599-government-publishes-roadmap-to-ease-covid-19-restrictions-and-reope/>

The Roadmap, phase one of which commenced on the 18th May, sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening.

It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The HSA will be the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

Farmers Markets

532. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if consideration will be given to the reopening farmers' markets to be permitted by implementing specific measures outlined (details supplied). [5581/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

As the Deputy will be aware, on 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday 18 May. This is in line with advice received from the

National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

The Roadmap provides that shops that are mainly outdoors can reopen in Phase 1 so long as social distancing measures can be put in place. Farmers markets' are among the examples of outdoor shops in the Roadmap.

I can assure the Deputy that this Government is doing everything in its power to get businesses ready to reopen and trade again, to get people back to work and to get the economy restarted as the restrictions are gradually lifted.

It is clear that the restrictions are having a very positive effect in combating the spread of COVID-19. However, extreme vigilance will be required until a vaccine, effective treatment or prophylaxis is found, and that might be some time away.

Covid-19 Pandemic

533. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will reconsider the proposed opening date for cinemas on 14 August 2020 and implement a more gradual, controlled return to business for cinemas in order to facilitate the backlog of movies included in the international film release schedule; if she will consider the health and safety implications of a sudden reopening of cinemas causing a more challenging environment for cinema management in addition to difficulties in enforcing social distancing; if she has considered the framework for reopening cinemas document from cinema providers (details supplied) outlining the procedural changes for social distancing in foyers and auditoriums; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5621/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

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Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

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The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

I have convened numerous meetings of the Enterprise and Retail forums, which I chair, and met other representatives of employers and employees and the response back has been very positive. I will continue to maintain that dialogue with stakeholders and examine any proposals submitted, such as the one referred to, so that we can work towards getting people back to work safely.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbej.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 8 May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30 June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country. I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. The Roadmap will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Commercial Property

534. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to undertake an initiative to address the issues regarding commercial rents in the context of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5631/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The issues businesses are facing in respect of commercial rents / leases have been raised with me through the Enterprise Forum and Retail Forum, both of which I chair, and other channels.

These are difficult times and many companies have had to temporarily close their businesses and/or premise(s), curtail their activities or make alternative work arrangements due to COVID-19 restrictions. I am keenly aware that some businesses, particularly in the retail sector, are concerned that some landlords are continuing to insist on the payment of rents and leases as normal despite their premises being closed.

At the same time, we must remember that landlords have their own financial obligations, like debt repayments, insurance or security costs, that still need to be paid. Where a landlord has debt in place, their flexibility will likely be driven by what their bank/lender will accept. The Minister for Finance raised the broader issue of rents in meetings with the pillar banks. He referenced this in his announcement of 18 March concerning an arrangement with the banks to the effect that any landlord who has agreed a deal with the banks on foot of the arrangement will be expected to pass the benefit on to their tenants. I reiterated this in the Dáil on 30 April last.

While commercial leases are primarily a contractual matter for the tenant and the landlord, the Government has urged landlords to demonstrate forbearance in these extraordinary times and to play their part, as everyone must, in helping the country through this difficult period. I would encourage tenants and landlords to engage with each other on this matter and come to some arrangement as it is in everybody's interest that terms are amicably agreed.

I have asked my officials to raise the matter of commercial rents and leases across a number of Government Departments. An initial inter-departmental discussion has already taken place and I understand further engagement is underway with a range of stakeholders, including groups representing businesses and landlords, to gain additional insights and gather intelligence to inform any further discussions. I have also asked my officials to look into the different responses from other countries and to identify possible options for supports.

While different options are being explored, I would point out that any support to business in respect of rents alone would ultimately end up as a support to the landlord. Not only would it be difficult to estimate the costs involved for such a scheme, but the offering of support, or even the perception that such supports will be forthcoming, may affect the market and lessen the impetus for landlords to renegotiate with tenants.

The matter of legal protections for businesses who are unable to pay their commercial rents has been raised with the Attorney General. Specifically, I asked about the potential for legislation to prevent the eviction of commercial tenants who have failed to pay rent as a result of the pandemic and the possibility of legislating to place a moratorium on businesses having to pay rent for premises they cannot use due to the restrictions imposed by Government. I have just received a response in which the Attorney General advises that there are significant legal difficulties in respect to both of the questions posed. The difficulties stem from a variety of legal bases including statutory, constitutional, contract and common law. I have asked my officials to consider the advice.

The Government is committed to ensuring as many businesses as possible survive this challenging period, and it will continue to look at how we can support businesses that have been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. I would like to point out that, on 2 May, the Government announced an additional suite of measures to further support small, medium and larger businesses that have been negatively impacted by Covid-19. These included:

- A €10,000 restart grant for micro and small businesses based on a rates waiver/rebate from 2019;
- A three-month commercial rates waiver for impacted businesses;

- A €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme to support lending to SMEs for terms ranging from 3 months to 6 years, which will be below market interest rates;

- A €2 billion Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund within the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF), which will make capital available to medium and large enterprises on commercial terms; and

- The ‘warehousing’ of tax liabilities for a period of twelve months after recommencement of trading during which time there will be no debt enforcement action taken by Revenue and no interest charge accruing in respect of the warehoused debt.

These supports acknowledge that impacted businesses need time and space to restructure and resume activity, without the added pressures of trying to repay legacy debts, such as commercial rents, when revenues are just beginning to return.

Further information on all of these and additional Government supports for COVID-19 impacted businesses can be found at www.gov.ie or on my Department’s website (<https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>).

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

535. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will amend the Covid-19 retail online scheme to offer more support to those that do not have a pre-existing online presence; if her attention has been drawn to the fact that just 69% of small and medium-sized enterprises here have a website and that only 32% of these online companies sell products or services online; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5638/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As Chair of the Retail Consultation Forum, I am acutely aware that Covid-19 has brought particular challenges for retailers - large and small, across the country.

Trading online is a very important route for retail businesses to grow and improve their business in the current crisis, and will be an important element in their recovery over the longer term. In April of this year I increased support for two online trading initiatives to a total of €7.6m – the first for micro enterprises in partnership with the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and the Environment, Richard Bruton TD, and the second for retailers with 10 or more employees.

Firstly, in conjunction with Minister Bruton’s Department of Climate Action and the Environment, I have increased support for the Trading Online Voucher Scheme which is available to all micro enterprises with less than 10 employees, including those in the retail sector through the Local Enterprise Office network nationwide. The €2,500 Trading Online Vouchers are a key government grant to help small and micro enterprises, with very limited or no e-commerce presence, to get online, boost their sales and reach new markets – particularly during this difficult period, when so many small businesses are closed to the public. However, the value of the Trading Online Voucher will stand to businesses for years to come, boosting revenue, and helping sustain and create jobs into the future.

The Voucher can be used towards adding payment facilities or booking systems to websites or developing new apps for customers, with co-funding from the business currently set at just 10 percent. The Voucher can also be used towards subscriptions to low-cost online retail platform solutions to help companies quickly establish a retailing presence online. Training and further business supports are also provided along with the Scheme.

Flexibilities to the Trading Online Voucher scheme are now in place allowing businesses apply for a second voucher where they have successfully utilised their first one, which brings the overall total voucher amount available up to €5,000 for each eligible business.

To qualify for the scheme, businesses must have:

- limited or no e-commerce presence
- no more than 10 employees;
- less than €2m in turnover;
- be trading for at least 6 months and
- be located in the region of the local enterprise office to whom they are applying (additional T&Cs apply)

Further details about the expanding Trading Online Voucher Scheme are available at <https://www.localenterprise.ie/Discover-Business-Supports/Trading-Online-Voucher-Scheme/>

The Covid-19 Online Retail Scheme is complementary to the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) Trading Online Voucher Scheme. The objective of the Scheme, administered by Enterprise Ireland, is to support companies in the indigenous retail sector which have started an online journey, which will have the most immediate impact enabling them to respond to both the domestic and international consumer demand with a competitive online offer.

My Department proposed this Scheme in response to the COVID-19 crisis and the urgent need for retail companies to achieve a step change in online capability. Applicant companies must employ 10 or more people, have an existing online presence (e.g. website or social media), and have a retail outlet through which they derive the majority of their revenue. Successful applicants will be awarded funding to support a maximum of 80% of the project costs. Grants ranging from €10,000 to €40,000 will be awarded under the competitive scheme.

This Scheme is not about taking the first steps; it is about raising the bar, in an informed, planned and strategic way. The total fund size will be up to €2 million under this call. Further details on this Scheme available at <https://www.enterprise-ireland.com/en/funding-supports/online-retail/online-retail-scheme/online-retail-scheme.html>

I am committed to supporting the needs of the retail sector in developing their online capability and enhancing their competitiveness.

Covid-19 Pandemic

536. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if a company (details supplied) is permitted to open on 18 May 2020. [5639/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday 18 May. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 8 May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30 June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country. I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Departmental Correspondence

537. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if a reply will issue to correspondence from a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5653/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday 18 May. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 8 May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30 June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with em-

ployees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country. I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Departmental Correspondence

538. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if a reply will issue to correspondence from a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5655/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government recognises that the COVID-19 emergency has had an unprecedented impact on our economy, as well as society. It is acknowledged that as the reopening of the economy begins, in line with the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business and based on public health advice, businesses will require additional supports on top of the existing measures such as income support schemes and enhanced liquidity supports.

Consequently, on 2 May the Government agreed a package of measures, with a value of over €6bn, to further support small, medium and larger business that are negatively impacted by COVID-19. The package aims to help our businesses to restart, reconnect and rehire staff. It includes grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs. Full details of the package are available at www.gov.ie.

The specific questions raised in the correspondence you reference cover a range of issues, some of which are outside the remit of my Department. A response will issue from my Department in respect of matters within my remit and the correspondence will be forward to other relevant Government Departments for their consideration.

Departmental Correspondence

539. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if a reply will issue to a query by a person (details supplied). [5656/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): A major part of my Department's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been to expand the range of financial supports to ensure businesses have sufficient liquidity to see them through the crisis and to prepare for the announced reopening phases. My Department and I continue to monitor the needs of companies as the situation evolves and provide new supports where

required and appropriate to do so.

Included in the now €7.5 billion of liquidity supports which I announced over the past few weeks, is a Sustaining Enterprise Fund for Small Enterprises which is being administered by Enterprise Ireland. This fund for smaller businesses provides €25,000 and €50,000 in repayable advances, depending on size and turnover of company. This fund will provide liquidity to enable these enterprises to steer a pathway towards recovery and to introduce measures in response to the controls and health and safety requirements in line with changing work patterns and protocols and guidelines being introduced as we begin the re-opening of the economy.

On 15 May last, the Government also agreed the arrangements for the new €250m “Restart Grant” for micro enterprises and small businesses. The “Restart Grant” is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. It will be a critically important tool to support small businesses to reopen their doors and get back on their feet. This grant will enable small and micro business reconnect with their employees and customer base by helping to defray ongoing fixed costs and the costs, such as PPE, associated with re-launching the business.

The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000. Applications for the “Restart Grant” can be made online to all local authorities from Friday 22 May.

In addition to the extensive package of liquidity measures announced, the full range of Enterprise Ireland, IDA, Local Enterprise Office (LEO) and Údarás na Gaeltachta grant and advisory supports continue to be available to eligible firms to help with strategies to access finance, commence or ramp-up online trading activity, reconfigure business models, cut costs, innovate, diversify markets and supply chains and to improve competitiveness.

In line with its statutory responsibility to enforce specific consumer protection legislative provisions, officers from the CCPC have been monitoring pricing compliance in both online and on-premises retail markets within three areas:

1. Trader obligations under S.I. No. 639 of 2002, European Communities (Requirements to Indicate Product Prices) Regulations.
2. Trader obligations under S.I. No. 484 of 2013 European Union (Consumer Information, Cancellation and Other Rights) Regulations.
3. Trader obligations under The Consumer Protection Act 2007.

The provisions outlined above are primarily concerned with ensuring that products are properly priced in accordance with the regulations and that consumers are not being misled by being charged more for a product than the advertised price.

In the course of our monitoring activities we have conducted 110 store visits and 730 spot price checks on a range of consumer products. Our information to date would indicate that compliance levels with the obligations referred to above are currently not a cause for concern. Monitoring activities in that respect will continue.

With respect to emerging trends, the number of contacts received by the CCPC from the general public relating to concerns about price increases and product availability have been very low.

I can assure the Deputy that I continue to work with my colleagues across Government and all stakeholders to examine further appropriate supports to assist businesses impacted by Co-

vid-19. In that regard, Government will continue to explore funding potential for all enterprises as they work through the challenges facing them, including through any mechanisms allowable under the EU's state aid framework.

Work Permits

540. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if the list of ineligible occupations for work permits will be reviewed in view of Covid-19 and the urgent need for more healthcare professionals, including healthcare assistants, senior care workers and home carers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5662/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Ireland operates a managed employment permits system maximising the benefits of economic migration and minimising the risk of disrupting Ireland's labour market. The system is intended to act as a conduit for key skills which are required to develop enterprise in the State for the benefit of our economy, while simultaneously protecting the balance of the labour market. The system is, by design, vacancy led and driven by the changing needs of the labour market, expanding and contracting in tandem with its inherent fluctuations.

The Critical Skills and Ineligible Occupations Lists are subject to twice-yearly review which is predicated on a formalised and evidence-based process and involves consideration of the research undertaken by the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (Solas), the Expert Group of Future Skills Needs (EGFSN), the National Skills Council, and input by relevant Government Departments in addition to the public consultation phase. Submissions to the review process are also considered by the Economic Migration Policy Interdepartmental Group chaired by this Department and which includes the Department of Health. A review of the lists is currently underway and is expected to be finalised before the end of June 2020.

The Employment Permits system has an important role in ensuring that key medical staff are available for our health services at this critical juncture as the country tackles this emerging situation. As a result, my Department has been prioritising the processing of employment permit applications for medical personnel and these applications continue to be prioritised. I have also facilitated the access of diploma qualified nurses and radiographers to Critical Skills Employment Permits and made improvements in the assignment of work permits to doctors on rotation.

Since mid-March 1,404 employment permits have been granted to medical personnel, comprising 745 permits for Nurses, 642 permits for Doctors and 17 permits for Radiographers. Some occupations such as Healthcare Assistants are currently on the Ineligible Occupations List and, following the completion of the most recent review in December 2019, were not proposed for amendment at that time.

In light of the COVID-19 crisis and following the submission of a new business case from Nursing Home representatives regarding the removal of healthcare assistants from the ineligible occupation list, discussions have commenced between officials of my Department and the Department of Health.

I also understand that the Department of Health and HSE are engaging with the private and voluntary nursing homes sector, in the context of addressing the COVID 19 emergency. In addition, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection has rolled out a scheme to increase national take up of newly emerging employment opportunities. In light of this, I am advised that it was agreed that a change to the employment permits lists in this regard would

not be pursued at this time but may however be revisited at a later date.

Departmental Correspondence

541. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if a reply will issue to correspondence from a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5667/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday 18 May. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 8 May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to

businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30 June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to flex the plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

542. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of firms that have applied for each enterprise support measure and-or scheme since 1 March 2020 in response to Covid-19 provided by her Department and each State agency under her remit; the number of firms that have received assistance to date; the value of supports that have been granted; the breakdown by SMEs by size, that is, less than ten, 11 to 49, 50 to 249 and greater than 250 employees, respectively, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5669/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Covid-19 has brought unprecedented challenges for all of us in society, since the start of the pandemic, a key focus of Government has been to keep the supports provided for enterprise under review and to continue to support enterprises as they work through the challenges facing them.

I announced on April 8 a major expansion of supports for all businesses impacted by Covid-19. The package is now worth €1 billion in liquidity measures including a new €180m Sustaining Enterprise Fund.

In addition to the new package of liquidity measures I announced, which are detailed below, the full range of Enterprise Ireland, IDA, Local Enterprise Office (LEO) and Údarás na Gaeltachta grant and advisory supports continue to be available to eligible firms to help with strategies to access finance, commence or ramp-up online trading activity, reconfigure business models, cut costs, innovate, diversify markets and supply chains and to improve competitiveness.

For Enterprise Ireland

- Sustaining Enterprise Fund: This €180 million fund will provide support to eligible manufacturing and internationally traded services companies employing 10 or more employees who have been impacted by a 15 per cent or more reduction in actual or projected turnover or profit, and/or have a significant increase in costs as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. The objectives of the scheme are to ensure eligible companies have access to the necessary liquidity and sustain business so that companies can return to viability and contribute to the recovery of the Irish economy.

The Fund will provide financial assistance in the form of repayable advances of up to a maximum of €800,000 per company.

- This fund will provide a €25k to €50k short term working capital injection to eligible smaller companies to support business continuity and strengthen their ability to return to growth and be trading strongly in three year's time.

- New HPSU fund to Sustain Enterprises: This fund is aimed at EI High Potential Start-Up companies who, due to the Covid-19 pandemic are facing delays to projected sales growth and whose fundraising plans are significantly impacted or stalled. Under this fund, HPSUs can apply for co-investment of €50,000 per undertaking in the form of equity or convertible debt instruments.

In addition to this fund Enterprise Ireland has launched the following supports:

- Covid-19 Business Financial Planning Grant: A €5k grant for eligible companies to work with third party consultants to prepare a detailed financial plan with forecasts and assumptions.

- Lean Business Continuity Voucher: A €2.5k voucher for eligible companies to access training or advisory services support related to the continued operation of their business during the current pandemic.

- Covid-19 Online Retail Scheme is a grant for retail companies with greater than 10 employees to develop a more competitive online offer. This competitive call has a budget of €2 million. Successful applicants will receive funding support of up to 80% of project costs, with a maximum grant of €40,000.

In addition to these new supports, there are a range of other supports available to companies to assist eligible companies respond to Covid-19; these are:

- Strategic Consultancy Grant
- Act On supports
- Key Manager Grant
- Business Process Improvement Grant
- eiLearn Online Learning Platform
- EI Virtual Mentoring Support

In addition to the Covid-19 supports, Enterprise Ireland has a range of supports to assist companies to start, scale, innovate, remain competitive and diversify into new markets.

For SMEs:

The €200m SBCI COVID-19 Working Capital Loan Scheme will increase by €250m to €450m. The Scheme is providing essential liquidity support to businesses with over 1,400 applications received by the SBCI so far. Loans can be between €25,000 and €1.5m at a maximum interest rate of 4%. Loan terms range from one year to three years and loans can be unsecured up to €500,000. Interest-only repayments may be available at the start of the loans.

I am supporting the provision of significant additional COVID-19 funding through the SBCI Future Growth Loan Scheme, which will be released in tranches, to provide longer-term loans to COVID-19 impacted businesses. Loan amounts will range €100,000 to a maximum of €3,000,000 per applicant. Loan terms range from 8 to 10 years and loans of up to €500,000 can

be unsecured. Interest-only repayments may be available at the start of the loans. The maximum interest rate will be 4.5%.

New €2,500 Business Continuity Voucher:

This Voucher is available through Local Enterprise Offices and is designed for businesses across every sector that employ up to 50 people. It can be used by companies to develop short-term and long-term strategies to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. These measures are in addition to the €150m of funding capacity in the Government's Credit Guarantee Scheme.

Microenterprises (under 10 employees) and businesses with over 10 employees:

I am providing Microfinance Ireland (MFI), which is administering special COVID-19 Loans, with an additional €13m in capital support bringing its total lending capacity up to €20m for the coming period. There is also a substantial reduction in interest rates on these loans from 7.8% to 4.5%. Loans can be made up to €50,000 with no repayments required and no interest charged in the first six months.

The €2,500 Trading Online Voucher Scheme for microenterprises is being expanded - an additional €3.3m is being provided to the scheme bringing the total available to €5.6m. The scheme is also being made more flexible - allowing businesses to apply for a second voucher of up to €2,500 where they have successfully utilised their first one; and allowing subscriptions to low-cost online retailing platform solutions to quickly establish a retailing presence online.

InterTradeIreland

ITI has launched two new business supports, these are currently being targeted at companies who are already on one of their programmes.

E-merge: this will enable companies to engage consultancy support & advice (to the value of £2500/€2800) to help them develop online sales & ecommerce solutions

Emergency Business Solutions: Fully funded consultancy support & advice (to the value of £2000/€2250) to address key business challenges in areas such as emergency cashflow, loan applications and HR/People.

On Saturday 2 May, I also announced a further suite of measures to support small, medium and larger business that are negatively impacted by Covid-19 with Minister Paschal Donohoe, T.D., Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform and Minister Eoghan Murphy, T.D., Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government. This package of support followed the publication of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business, which sets out a five-stage plan to ease the Covid-19 restrictions and reopen Ireland's economy and society. The new measures we announced included:

- A €10,000 restart grant for micro and small businesses based on a rates/waiver rebate from 2019;
- A three-month commercial rates waiver for impacted businesses;
- A €2 billion Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund within the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF), which will make capital available to medium and large enterprises on commercial terms;
- A €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme to support lending to SMEs for terms ranging from 3 months to 6 years, which will be below market interest rates;

- The ‘warehousing’ of tax liabilities for a period of twelve months after recommencement of trading during which time there will be no debt enforcement action taken by Revenue and no interest charge accruing in respect of the warehoused debt; and,

- A commitment to local authorities to make up the rates shortfall, so that local authorities can continue to provide full services to the public.

As the Deputy is aware I also announced details of the new €250 million Restart Grant for businesses on 15th May last. Eligible businesses can apply for a grant of a minimum of €2,000 and maximum of €10,000 and the scheme will be open for applications through local authorities from 22nd May.

The Government continues to explore funding potential at EU level, as necessary, for all enterprises including micro-enterprises as they work through the challenges facing them, through all potential funding mechanisms such as the European Regional Development Fund and through the mechanism of the EU’s state aid framework. The Government remained poised to react swiftly to the developing landscape for enterprises and will continue to keep the supports provided for enterprise under review.

Table 1: Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme uptake by business size:

Number of Employees	Number of Loans	Value of Loans
Less than 10	77	€7,176,000
11 - 50	46	€8,384,000
51-250	10	€5,700,000
Total	133	€21,260,000

Table 1 provides details of the first €21.26m of loans progressed to sanction under this scheme, sorted by the size of the applicant businesses.

Table 2: Future Growth Loan Scheme uptake by business size:

Number of Employees	Number of Loans	Value of Loans
Less than 10	720	€116,243,376
11 - 49	271	€79,859,660
50-249*	52	€25,840,500
Total	1043	€221,943,536

Table 2 provides details of the first €222m of loans progressed to sanction under this scheme, sorted by the size of the applicant businesses.

*Please note that the number of businesses of more than 250 employees that have benefitted from the scheme is small and these have been included in the category of businesses with 50-249 employees to avoid any potential confidentiality issues.

Note: The employment data in the table above for EI supports is based on the Annual Employment Survey 2019. Please note the companies with no employment classifications were not included in the AES survey. The figures above represent the figures at plant level and is not an indication of their company SME/Large status.

Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland

543. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of businesses that have applied to the SBCI Covid-19 working capital loan and future

growth loan schemes; the number of firms that have received assistance to date; the number of applications approved to date; the amount loaned; the breakdown by SMEs by size, that is, less than ten, 11 to 49, 50 to 249 and greater than 250 employees, respectively, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5670/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The SBCI Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme was announced on 11 March and opened for eligibility applications on 23 March. The Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme is offered by my Department in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and is supported by the InnovFin SME Guarantee facility. The scheme is operated by the SBCI.

It currently makes available a fund of up to €200 m to eligible businesses that have been negatively affected by impacts arising from the outbreak of Covid-19 to enable those businesses to innovate, change or adapt in response to the current business environment. Following my further announcement on April 8 this Scheme is now being expanded to make available an additional €250 million in lending, which will bring the total amount of lending available under this scheme to €450 million.

The scheme features a two-stage application process. Businesses must first confirm their eligibility with the SBCI. Successful applicants will be issued an eligibility reference number, which they can then use to apply for a loan with one of the participating finance providers. Approval of loans is subject to the finance providers' own credit policies and procedures.

Up to 10 May, there has been a total of 2,118 applications received to the COVID-19 WCS, of which 2,017 candidates were eligible, 13 ineligible and 88 applications are currently in process. To date, 189 loans have progressed to sanction to a total value of €33.03m.

Table 1 provides details of the first €21.26m of loans progressed to sanction under this scheme, sorted by the size of the applicant businesses.

The Future Growth Loan Scheme makes up to €300 million of loans available with a term of 8-10 years and is operated by the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) through participating lenders. We have seen strong demand for the scheme since its launch in April 2019 across all sectors and regions including in exporting businesses and family businesses.

Up to 10 May, there has been a total of 3,502 applications for eligibility under the scheme, of which 3,327 have been approved for eligibility under the scheme. To date, 1045 loans have progressed to sanction to a total value of €222.78m.

The initial €300m funding for the FGLS has been almost fully subscribed, supporting a significant level of strategic investment by businesses. On 8 April, I announced a further expansion of this scheme and my Department is now working through the details of a significant expansion to bring this funding to market as soon as possible.

Table 2 provides details of the first €222m of loans progressed to sanction under this scheme, sorted by the size of the applicant businesses.

Table 1: Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme uptake by business size:

Number of Employees	Number of Loans	Value of Loans
1-10	77	€7,176,000
11 - 50	46	€8,384,000
51 - 250	10	€5,700,000
Total	133	€21,260,000

Table 2: Future Growth Loan Scheme uptake by business size:

Number of Employees	Number of Loans	Value of Loan1-10
1 - 9	720	€116,243,376
10 - 49	271	€79,859,660
50 - 249*	52	€25,840,500
Total	1043	€221,943,536

*Please note that the number of businesses of more than 250 employees that have benefitted from the scheme is small and these have been included in the category of businesses with 50-249 employees to avoid any potential confidentiality issues.

Microfinance Loan Fund Scheme

544. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of businesses that have availed of the Microfinance Ireland loan scheme since the 19 March 2020 Covid-19 announcement; the number of applications accepted and rejected, respectively; and the value of approved applications. [5671/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Covid-19 Loan, available from Microfinance Ireland (MFI), was introduced as a support to microenterprises to help them access funding arising from the Covid-19 crisis.

These loans are available for eligible microenterprises responding to Covid-19-related difficulties, the negative impact of which must be a minimum of 15% of actual or projected income or profit. Loans up to €50,000 are available with terms that include a six months interest free and repayment free moratorium, with the loan to then be repaid over the remaining 30 months of the 36-month loan period.

MFI provides vital support to microenterprises by filling the lending gap in the market by lending to business that cannot obtain loans from other commercial lenders. It lends to business that do not meet the conventional risk criteria applied by commercial lenders and applies interest rate charges for its lending which are not reflective of its credit risk.

Standard loans from Microfinance Ireland have interest rates of between 6.8% and 7.8%. Given the cost burden to businesses even with these subsidised rates of interest I decided to apply a substantial reduction in the interest rate to 4.5% on the Covid-19 loans provided by MFI. This reduced rate is available to all micro-enterprises where the application is made through the Local Enterprise Network or referred by a bank or Local Development Committees. The new rate for direct applications to MFI is reduced to 5.5%.

As these loans are available interest free for the first six months, the net effect is to further reduce the net interest rate payable over the period of the loan.

The types of businesses normally supported, if they could obtain unsecured bank funding, would normally attract a significantly higher rate of interest due to the unsecured nature of this lending and the inherent risk. Microfinance Ireland is a not-for-profit lender and is loss making due to the nature of the risk it is mandated to take.

There were 484 applications received under the Microfinance Ireland loan scheme from the 19 March 2020 up to 13 May 2020. There were 283 applications approved for a value of €7,985,762 and 103 applications deemed ineligible/declined. The remainder of applications are in progress within MFI's application process.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

545. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the application process and steps that micro and small businesses will have to take to access a restart grant of up to €10,000 in value as announced on 2 May 2020 (details supplied); if primary or secondary legislation will have to be enacted to operationalise this grant; and the amount allocated towards the grant scheme. [5672/20]

604. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the projected number of micro and small businesses which will be able to qualify for the maximum restart grant value as announced on 2 May 2020 (details supplied). [6350/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 545 and 604 together.

On Friday, 15 May 2020 the Government agreed details of the new €250m Restart Grant, which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures.

The Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30 June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers.

The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, or a minimum payment of €2,000, whichever is the higher, and a maximum payment of €10,000. Those businesses with outstanding rates bills are also eligible to make an application if they meet the criteria.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online to local authorities from Friday 22 May. Processing of applications and payment of the Restart Grant will depend on the initial surge of applications but, as far as is feasible, will be prioritised according to scheduled reopening dates in the national Roadmap.

To avail of the Restart Grant, a business must be in the Local Authorities Commercial Rates Payment System and:

1. have an annual turnover of less than €5m and employ between 1 to 50 people;
2. have closed and/or suffered a projected 25%+ loss in turnover to end June 2020;
3. commit to remain open or to reopen if it was closed;
4. declare the intention to retaining employees that are on The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) and to reemploy staff on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment where applicable.

The grant can be used to defray ongoing fixed costs and in particular for replenishing stock and for measures needed to ensure employee and customer safety.

This direct grant support is part of the wider €12bn package of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the Wage Subsidy Scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

546. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the likely interest rates foreseen under the €2 billion Covid-19 credit guarantee scheme as announced on 2 May 2020 (details supplied); and if the scheme is availing of new EU state aid flexibilities. [5674/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government on 2 May announced a new €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme as a further development of the existing Credit Guarantee Scheme already available from AIB, BOI and Ulster Bank.

This Scheme forms a major component of the government's strategy to aid SMEs in these difficult times by providing critical support to ensure businesses are facilitated in having access to credit facilities to assist a return to a more regular trading environment.

It will provide an 80% guarantee on lending to SMEs until the end of this year, for terms between 3 months and 6 years. The guarantee will support a wide range of lending products between €10,000 and €1 million that have a maximum term of 6 years or less.

The Scheme will be available to all SME sectors, including primary producers and to Mid-Caps employing up to 500 staff. It will have interest rates below current market rates. The implementation of this Scheme will require legislation, the drafting of which has commenced.

It will also require approval from the European Commission under the 'Temporary Framework for State aid measures to support the economy in the current COVID-19 outbreak'. My officials are working closely with DG Competition to ensure that this approval can be secured in a timely fashion.

The Government is supporting the provision of access to liquidity at lower than market rates. There is limited scope as some interest must be charged by the banks to cover overheads and capital costs if they are to continue to work with Government. However, I have asked my officials to continue to look into the question of interest rates and see if there is a way to achieve interest rate reductions.

There are strong advantages to loan schemes that run through the banks –

- There is a wide reach across the country.
- They encourage businesses to continue their existing relationships with their banks.
- Banks understand the financial issues faced by customers during this crisis and can work through problems with them – in addition the banks have announced that they may be able to offer payment holiday or emergency working capital facilities.

Finally, loan schemes allow the Government to leverage Exchequer funding to increase the volume of funding available, thereby providing much-needed support to more businesses.

These loans are one part of the suite of initial supports for Covid-19 affected businesses, which also includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, waiver of commercial rates, warehousing of tax liabilities as well as advisory & mentoring supports.

Health and Safety Regulations

547. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when the new Health and Safety Authority workplace guidelines will be published for reopening

businesses. [5677/20]

572. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when the national protocol on Covid-19 issues will be published that is under negotiation between the Government, unions and employers with the assistance of the Health and Safety Authority with respect to the reopening of businesses when the restrictions have lifted; and if primary legislation will be needed to enact the provisions of this protocol. [5990/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 547 and 572 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, I launched the national “Return to Work Safely Protocol” Saturday, 9 May 2020.

The Protocol was drafted in close consultation with the social partners under the auspices of the Labour and Employer Economic Forum and agreed with them.

Under the Health, Safety and Welfare at Work Act, 2005, the HSA has full powers to oversee compliance with the health, safety and wellbeing of workers in their place of work. While COVID-19 is a public health issue, the infectious nature of the virus and the way in which it is easily transmitted through human contact, makes it a workplace health and safety issue as well as a general health matter. Neither health, safety nor welfare are narrowly defined in the 2005 Act, so the HSA has all of the powers that it needs.

While there are clear public health measures in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the Protocol is designed to translate these measures into a clear compliance framework designed for places of work. This is to help businesses to reopen so that workers can feel safe returning to work. The Health and Safety Authority will ensure compliance with the Protocol through a range of measures including advice, guidance, inspection and enforcement action as appropriate under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005.

The Protocol provides that within the workplace every employer will prepare a COVID-19 specific Response Plan and appoint at least one lead COVID-19 worker representative. The Protocol also provides that this Plan will be developed in consultation with workers. Existing safety representatives in the workplace appointed under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 2005, can play a valuable role in this regard. I am satisfied that this approach will ensure the necessary collaboration and co-operation between employers and employees who share the common goal of keeping workplaces safe.

Phase 1 of the reopening of the economy began on Monday last and, as I said at the time, the HSA and other inspectors are out there advising and guiding employers on how to respect the Protocol. Helping businesses to comply is the overall goal of the HSA. However if, following an inspection, the inspector forms the opinion that further action is required, the appropriate action, up to and including the closure of a workplace, will be taken using the relevant powers. Where relevant, the public health authorities will be involved.

A high-level consultative stakeholder forum, under the aegis of LEEF, has been established to oversee the implementation of the Protocol as the economy opens up, in line with the Government’s Roadmap. The forum will include membership from the various bodies with responsibility for health and safety at work, and for public health more generally.

Enterprise Support Services

548. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the way in which small and micro firms will access the redesigned €200 million sustaining enterprise scheme under new EU state aid flexibilities. [5678/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department will continue to monitor the needs of companies as the situation evolves and provide new supports where required and appropriate to do so. The €180m Sustaining Enterprise Fund is specifically aimed at all firms with 10 or more employees in the manufacturing and international services sectors impacted by COVID-19 that are vulnerable but viable. The Fund will be operated by Enterprise Ireland, providing repayable advances of up to €800,000 as agreed with the EU under new State Aid rules and, together with leveraged lending from the financial markets, should see up to €500m of additional investment in vulnerable but viable firms. This fund will be repayable only after a three-year grace period and repayment by end of year 5 on successful achievement of the project objective.

I have also launched a new Sustaining Enterprise Fund for Small Enterprises on Thursday 7th May. This now includes a specific fund for smaller businesses of €25,000 and €50,000, depending on size and turnover of company. This fund will be operated by Enterprise Ireland and provide liquidity to enable these enterprises to steer a pathway towards recovery and to introduce measures in response to the controls and health and safety requirements in line with changing work patterns and protocols and guidelines being introduced as we begin the re-opening of the economy.

These supports together with the full range of Enterprise Ireland, IDA, Local Enterprise Office (LEO) and Údarás na Gaeltachta grant and advisory supports continue to be available to eligible firms to help with strategies to access finance, commence or ramp-up online trading activity, reconfigure business models, cut costs, innovate, diversify markets and supply chains and to improve competitiveness.

On Friday 15 May last, the Government agreed the arrangements for the new €250m “Restart Grant” for micro enterprises and small businesses. The Restart Grant is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. Eligible businesses will receive a Restart Grant equivalent to their commercial rates assessment for 2019 (excluding arrears), subject to a minimum grant of €2,000 and a maximum of €10,000. This grant will provide funding to enable small and micro business reconnect with their employees and customer base by helping to defray ongoing fixed costs and the costs, such as PPE, associated with re-launching the business.

I can assure the Deputy that I continue to work with my colleagues across Government and all stakeholders to examine further appropriate supports to assist businesses impacted by Covid-19. In that regard, Government will continue to explore funding potential for all enterprises as they work through the challenges facing them, including through any mechanisms allowable under the EU’s state aid framework.

Examinership Arrangements

549. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she has examined the proposal by small business representatives to extend the examinership protection window for Covid-19 impacted businesses on a temporary basis. [5679/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department is progressing as a matter of priority proposals to amend the Companies Acts to

mitigate the immediate effects of the Covid-19 crisis on business. Included are proposals to provide the Court with the power to extend the protection provided by it during examinership.

Examinership remains very relevant in the context of preserving viable businesses and protecting jobs. It is a managed process that includes the interests of customers, creditors, suppliers and employees and staff. I have asked my officials and the Company Law Review Group to examine all proposals as a matter of urgency. The CLRG is a statutory body charged with advising me on all matters pertaining to company law to promote enterprise and enhance corporate governance. Membership of the CLRG is wide and representative of the broad range of stakeholders with an interest in company law. This includes bodies such as ISME and the SFA, both of which specifically represent the interests of small and medium sized businesses. This group is ideally positioned to fully consider the many issues arising from a unique wide-ranging perspective.

Health and Safety Regulations

550. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her views on proposed measures in correspondence (details supplied) to ensure the health and safety of staff and customers in order to facilitate the reopening of hairdressing services in advance of the timeline in the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business impacted by Covid-19; and her further views on other concerns highlighted in the correspondence regarding providers operating on the black market. [5680/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15th May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18th. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can reopen under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate. The Protocol is available at <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>.

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need

further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead.

On 8th May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30th June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

These supports were developed and put in place in light of feedback I received while engaging with businesses. Since this crisis began, I have convened numerous meetings of the Enterprise and Retail forums, which I chair, and met other representatives of employers and employees and the response back has been very positive. I will continue to maintain that dialogue with stakeholders, including representatives of the hairdressing sector, so that we can work towards getting people back to work safely.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country. I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

In my view, circumventing current restrictions represents a willful act which increases the risk of spreading COVID-19 and undermines our ambitions to protect our people and our economy by unwinding restrictions safely. Addressing the shadow economy is an important part of ensuring fairness and a level playing field for all businesses and workers in our economy, especially at a time when we are trying to ensure that we can safely and gradually return to work and productivity. While the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) works with the Department of Employment and Social Protection and the Office of the Revenue Commissioners to address the challenges posed by the shadow economy, the Revenue Commissioners lead in this matter and further information in this regard is available at <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/assist-us/reporting-shadow-economy-activity/what-revenue-is-doing.aspx>

Consumer Rights

551. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the recourse available to consumers to ensure they receive full refunds if they decide to cancel a package holiday in view of Covid-19; the consumer statutory entitlements under Irish and EU laws in this area; and the appropriate State body and Department that has the lead remit in this area. [5682/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Section 18A(4)(a) of the Package Holidays and Travel Trade Act 1995 which gives effect to Article 12(2) of Directive (EU) 2015/2302 on package travel and linked travel arrangements provides that ‘the traveller shall have the right to terminate the package travel contract before start of the package in the event of unavoidable and extraordinary circumstances occurring at the place of destination or its immediate vicinity and significantly affecting the performance of the package, or which significantly affect the carriage of passengers to the destination’. Section 18(4)(b) provides that ‘where the traveller terminates the package travel contract under paragraph (a), the traveller shall –

(i) not be required to any termination fee,

(ii) be entitled to a full refund from the organiser of all payments made for the package without undue delay’.

Section 18A(7) of the Act which gives effect to Article 12(4) of the Directive provides that the organiser of a package must make any refunds due to a traveller under section 18A(4) not later than 14 days after the package travel contract is terminated.

Determining whether unavoidable and extraordinary circumstances significantly affecting the performance of a package, or the carriage of passengers to a destination, exist normally requires a case-by-case assessment of the particular circumstances affecting the package concerned. In current circumstances where the Government’s Covid-19 Travel Advisory advises ‘against all non-essential travel overseas until further notice’ and where restrictions on entry by non-nationals into other countries are widely in force, it can be taken that such unavoidable and extraordinary circumstances apply generally.

The Competition and Consumer Protection is responsible for the enforcement of section 18A of the Package Holidays and Travel Trade Act 1995. The Commission for Aviation Regulation has responsibility for the administration and enforcement of the insolvency protection provisions of the 1995 Act and related enactments, principally the Transport (Tour Operators and Travel Agents) Act 1982. As the 1995 Act and these related enactments were enacted on the basis of Bills initiated, or Statutory Instruments signed, by the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, the Department of Transport, Tourism has the lead role for consumer protection in the package travel area.

Gift Vouchers

552. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the recourse customers have if they have unused gift vouchers for a company that has now entered liquidation; and the consumer statutory entitlements under Irish and EU laws in this area. [5683/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys):

Where a company has entered liquidation, consumers who hold unredeemed or partly redeemed gift vouchers are classed as unsecured creditors and have no express entitlements under Irish or EU law. The priority of creditors in winding-up situations is determined by section 621 of the Companies Act 2014. As unsecured creditors, consumers who hold gift vouchers, or who have paid deposits or other pre-payments, rank behind secured creditors such as banks and preferential creditors such as employees and the Revenue Commissioners. The sole recourse available to consumers in such situations is to lodge a claim with the liquidator and await the distribution of any remaining assets to unsecured creditors after secured and preferential creditors have been paid.

If a gift voucher has been purchased with a credit, debit or prepaid card and the company enters liquidation within the time limit for the chargeback process, typically 120 days from the date of the transaction, consumers should contact their card provider to ascertain if the payment made for the voucher can be recovered through this process.

Jobs Protection

553. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the actions taken to protect jobs at a company (details supplied); if she has spoken with the management of the company regarding safeguarding jobs here; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5685/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I extend my sympathies to the workers in Debenhams who have lost their jobs and appreciate that the situation is difficult for those directly impacted and their families. I can assure the workers impacted that there are Government supports in place to help them through this time. Neither I nor my Department has had contact with the management of Debenhams.

As the Deputy may be aware, the High Court has appointed joint liquidators of Debenhams Retail (Ireland) Limited. In this context, as Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, I have no statutory power to intervene in a court-supervised liquidation. The liquidation process in this instance will be subject to oversight of the High Court.

My Department has agreed a Job Loss Response Protocol with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and the Department of Education and Skills. The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection will lead on this. The protocol puts in place all the efforts to assist the workers. It includes welfare entitlements, job-search assistance and upskilling needs/opportunities.

My colleague Minister Regina Doherty and her Department, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection has responsibility for providing support for the workers who have unfortunately lost their jobs due to the closure of the Debenhams Irish stores.

The Pandemic Unemployment Payment is available for all persons who have become unemployed as a result of COVID-19 and is also payable with redundancy. Jobseeker's Allowance and Benefit are also options for financial aid for those persons now unemployed as a result of the closure of Debenhams Irish stores.

In the case of any concession staff who are self-employed, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment applies if their trading income has collapsed to the extent that they are available to take up other full-time employment if it is offered to them. If a person subsequently applies for Jobseekers Benefit Self-Employed, that claim will be considered separately under the rules of that Scheme.

The Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) is mandated to secure compliance with employment rights legislation and continues to be fully operational and available to any interested parties who may require it. If employees of Debenhams have concerns or complaints regarding their employment rights the Customer Service Section of the WRC provides information in relation to employment, equality and industrial relations rights and obligations, and how to obtain redress where appropriate.

Covid-19 Pandemic

554. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the estimated costs to businesses for March and April 2020 with regard to Covid-19 closures and reductions in business activity; and the estimated monthly costs to businesses nationwide for May, June, July and August 2020 due to the announced restrictions. [5693/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): It is unclear which costs are referred to in the question. Costs may include ongoing operational fixed costs, stock depreciation, opportunity costs in terms of declining revenues, costs associated with preparing workplaces to align with public health and physical distancing guidelines, and so forth. There are also of course human costs associated with the letting go of staff and reduced social contact.

These costs, and other impacts, will be contingent on the particular situation for every business and will be influenced by factors such as sectoral dimensions; the relevance and impact of current restrictions; the relevant phasing in the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; the adaptations made by the business, for example using e-commerce channels; the uptake of available supports; and available sub-supply and customer demand.

With so many variables, and the challenges of having timely data for some across the breadth of the enterprise base, monthly estimates are not available.

Considering the Stability Programme Update (SPU) published recently by the Department of Finance, and notwithstanding that there is a huge degree of uncertainty, it is clear that the economy has suffered a severe shock without historical precedent. Under the Department's central scenario, GDP is projected to decline by over 10% in 2020. Some 220,000 jobs will be lost with the unemployment rate exceeding 25% in the second quarter of the year. Based on the analysis in the SPU and other detailed sectoral and labour market analysis it is clear that as of now the most-heavily impacted sectors are accommodation and food, construction, and other personal services. Other sectors where the impacts are significant but somewhat less severe include the manufacturing sector, administrative and support services, wholesale and retail trade and transport and storage. This pattern of sectoral impacts is similar to that observed in other countries. Sector where remote working is not feasible or that rely on personal contact with consumers are hugely exposed to the necessary travel and other restrictions that containment of the virus requires.

The phased reopening of the economy will see a slow return to economic activity although it is anticipated that it will take considerable time before the economy returns to the levels which pertained prior to COVID-19. Therefore, the Government will continue to focus on assisting the enterprise sector through financial and advisory supports as well as continuing to develop new measures which help address the particular challenges across enterprise sectors as they arise and as sectors reopen.

Covid-19 Pandemic

555. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if consideration will be given to reopening cinemas earlier than planned with social distancing proposals (details supplied). [5711/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website *gov.ie*.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or *wcu@hsa.ie*.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 8 May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30 June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with em-

ployees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country. I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Covid-19 Pandemic

556. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if consideration will be given to reopening cinemas earlier than planned with social distancing proposals (details supplied). [5712/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website *gov.ie*.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need

further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 8 May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30 June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country. I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

557. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the position regarding possible grants and supports for employees in addition to cash flow finance for the tourism hotel sectors and restaurants that are badly hit by the Covid-19 crisis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5719/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Many of the business supports that have been put in place since the COVID-19 crisis began, and which are administered on behalf of my Department, are available to the hospitality sector.

On 2 May, I announced a number of additional measures to aid the economy as the COVID-19 restrictions start to be lifted. These are part of an economic plan worth up to €6.5 billion to help businesses impacted by COVID-19 and minimise the extent of the economic damage caused by the pandemic. Those measures are:

- A €10,000 Restart Grant for micro and small businesses based on a rates/waiver rebate from 2019;
- A three month commercial rates waiver for impacted businesses;

- A €2 billion Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund within the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF), which will make capital available to medium and large enterprises on commercial terms;

- A €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme to support lending to SMEs for terms ranging from 3 months to 6 years, which will be below market interest rates;

- The ‘warehousing’ of tax liabilities for a period of twelve months after recommencement of trading during which time there will be no debt enforcement action taken by Revenue and no interest charge accruing in respect of the warehoused debt.

These specific measures supplement those supports for business that the Government put in place at the start of the COVID-19 crisis. There is now a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst our SMEs. These supports are designed to build confidence, further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies, and allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead.

For further information on all of my Department’s supports for business please go to <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

I understand that there is ongoing engagement by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport with Fáilte Ireland and representatives of the hospitality sector for the purpose of addressing the challenges currently posed by COVID-19 for that sector. These discussions may identify proposals for further supports which will fall to be considered by Government.

As the matter of supports for employees in the tourism hotel sectors falls within the policy responsibility of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, I am not in a position to elaborate upon those supports. Useful information is, however, available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/eca524-covid-19-information-for-employees/>.

Credit Guarantee Scheme

558. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of applications and loans approved for the credit guarantee scheme since 19 March 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5734/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Government announced a new €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme as a further development of the existing Credit Guarantee Scheme already available from AIB, BOI and Ulster Bank. This Scheme forms a major component of the government’s strategy to aid SMEs in these difficult times by providing critical support to ensure businesses are facilitated in having access to credit facilities to assist a return to a more regular trading environment. It will provide an 80% guarantee on lending to SMEs until the end of this year, for terms between 3 months and 6 years. The guarantee will support a wide range of lending products between €10,000 and €1 million that have a maximum term of 6 years or less. The Scheme will be available to all SME sectors, including primary producers and will have interest rates below current market rates. The implementation of this Scheme will require legislation, and my officials are currently working with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel on drafting.

There are a number of liquidity supports for COVID 19 impacted businesses available right now, including the existing Credit Guarantee Scheme which was implemented in 2012, sup-

porting loans up to €1 million for periods of up to 7 years. The scheme is designed to support a range of debt products appropriate to the borrowing needs of SMEs. Term loans and other products such as stocking facilities, performance bonds are covered by the Scheme. It is possible for SMEs to avail of between a three to six-month interest-only payment period subject to the lender's assessment of the application.

An application to access the Credit Guarantee Scheme can be made through one of the participating lenders which are currently Allied Irish Banks, Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank Ireland. The Scheme is operated by SBCI, the Department plays no role in the application or decision-making process, which, is fully delegated to the participating lenders. The Credit Guarantee Scheme facilitates guarantees up to a maximum of €150 million in any one year.

When the COVID-19 crisis began, I made changes to the Credit Guarantee Scheme to make it easier for businesses to access – including removing the requirement that businesses be refused a loan by the banks before they could access the scheme.

However, at this time the demand for working capital financing is channeling through the COVID-19 working capital scheme which has 2,278 eligibility applications from SBCI and 237 loans sanctioned for €37 million. There have been no approved facilities submitted to SBCI from financial providers since 19 March.

I can assure the Deputy that I continue to work with my colleagues across Government to examine further supports to assist businesses impacted by Covid-19.

Covid-19 Pandemic

559. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she has engaged with cinema operators in relation to concerns regarding the unphased reopening of their industry (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5760/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

I have not had direct discussions with cinemas. However, I have regular engagement with the various business representative groups through my Department's Enterprise Forum on Covid-19 and the Retail Consultation Forum both of which I Chair. I will continue to maintain that dialogue with stakeholders so that we can work towards getting people back to work safely.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary

for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 8 May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30 June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country. I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Departmental Correspondence

560. Deputy Fergus O'Dowd asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if a reply will issue to correspondence from a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5784/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The

Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website *gov.ie*.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

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The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or *wcu@hsa.ie*.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/> .

On 8 May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30th June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and

clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to flex the plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Farmers Markets

561. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if consideration will be given to reopening farmers' markets to be permitted by implementing the specific measures outlined in a document (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5786/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

As the Deputy will be aware, on 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website *gov.ie*.

The Roadmap provides that shops that are mainly outdoors can reopen in Phase 1 so long as social distancing measures can be put in place. Farmers markets' are among the examples of outdoor shops in the Roadmap.

I can assure the Deputy that this Government is doing everything in its power to get businesses ready to reopen and trade again, to get people back to work and to get the economy re-started as the restrictions are gradually lifted.

It is clear that the restrictions are having a very positive effect in combating the spread of COVID-19. However, extreme vigilance will be required until a vaccine, effective treatment or prophylaxis is found, and that might be some time away.

Consumer Rights

562. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the recourse and rights a person has to cancel a package holiday and get a full refund for travel to the USA in June 2020 due to Covid-19 travel restrictions; if they are entitled not to pay the balance in order to get full refund once notice of cancellation is given; the statutory entitlements under Irish and EU laws for customers; the authority that has remit to investigate complaints that consumers may have in this area; and if she will make a statement on the mat-

ter. [5789/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Section 18A(4)(a) of the Package Holidays and Travel Trade Act 1995 which gives effect to Article 12(2) of Directive (EU) 2015/2302 on package travel and linked travel arrangements provides that ‘the traveller shall have the right to terminate the package travel contract before start of the package in the event of unavoidable and extraordinary circumstances occurring at the place of destination or its immediate vicinity and significantly affecting the performance of the package, or which significantly affect the carriage of passengers to the destination’. Section 18(4)(b) provides that ‘where the traveller terminates the package travel contract under paragraph (a), the traveller shall –

- (i) not be required to any termination fee,
- (ii) be entitled to a full refund from the organiser of all payments made for the package without undue delay’.

Section 18A(7) of the Act which gives effect to Article 12(4) of the Directive provides that the organiser of a package must make any refunds due to a traveller under section 18A(4) not later than 14 days after the package travel contract is terminated.

The Government’s Covid-19 Travel Advisory currently advises against ‘all non-essential travel overseas until further notice’. The Government roadmap of 1 May for Reopening Society and Business provides that up to 20 July, people should travel no more than 20 kilometres from their home. It is clear accordingly that a person travelling to the USA on a package holiday in June 2020 has the right to cancel the package under section 18A(4) of the Package Holidays and Travel Trade Act and to receive a full refund of all payments made for the package. Where this right applies, the traveller should not be required to pay the outstanding balance on the package in order to get a full refund of his or her payments.

The Competition and Consumer Protection is responsible for the enforcement of section 18A of the Package Holidays and Travel Trade Act 1995. The Commission for Aviation Regulation has responsibility for the administration and enforcement of the insolvency protection provisions of the 1995 Act and related enactments, principally the Transport (Tour Operators and Travel Agents) Act 1982.

On 8 May, the Government approved a proposal from the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport for a State guarantee for refund credit notes to be issued by registered travel agents and tour operators for package holidays cancelled due to restrictions arising from Covid-19. The refund credit notes will be redeemable for their cash value at a specified date and can be used to book a replacement holiday. The choice to accept a guaranteed credit note or to receive a refund of payments will remain with the traveller. The necessary legislative provisions for the refund credit notes are currently being drafted.

Job Losses

563. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if a company (details supplied) has an obligation to attend the Labour Relations Commission and or Labour Court to discuss company redundancy for its staff; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5798/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My

colleague the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection has legislative and policy responsibility for the Redundancy Payments Act, 1967 and the Protection of Employees (Employers' Insolvency) Act 1984. These Acts confer certain rights and provide statutory payments to employees, subject to certain qualifying criteria in redundancy and insolvency situations.

In accordance with the Companies Act 2014, I have no statutory power to intervene in a court-supervised liquidation, that is subject to oversight of the High Court. Under Part 11 of the Act a company is permitted to initiate a winding up where it has complied with the requirements of the Act.

The Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and the Labour Court are independent statutory offices under the aegis of my Department. Negotiation of ex gratia payments in redundancy situations is an industrial relations matter. Ireland's system of industrial relations is, essentially, voluntary in nature and responsibility for the resolution of industrial disputes between employers and workers, rests with the employer, the workers and their representatives.

Participation in hearings or discussions in the WRC dealing with industrial disputes is voluntary, whether collective or individual. Should both parties wish to avail of the service of the WRC, its services may be available on request.

Participation in hearings before the Labour Court under industrial relations legislation dealing with industrial disputes is also voluntary. In collective matters a Labour Court hearing would normally occur only following a joint request by the parties to the Court to investigate the matter following conciliation at the WRC.

In circumstances, where an individual makes a complaint to the WRC under certain legislation listed under Schedule 5 of the Workplace Relations Act 2015, such as the Redundancy Payments Acts 1967, the Adjudication Officer hearing the complaint may, by giving notice in that behalf in writing to any person, require such person to attend at such time and place as is specified in the notice to give evidence in relation to any matter referred to the Adjudication Officer under that section or to produce any documents in his possession, custody or control which relate to any such matter. The WRC Adjudication Officers decision may be appealed to the Labour Court in accordance with the Act.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

564. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of food businesses that have applied for working capital under the Covid-19 loan scheme which opened in March 2020; the number of such businesses that have been sanctioned financing to date; and the value of same. [5832/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I announced the SBCI Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme (WCS) on 11 March and it opened for eligibility applications on 23 March. The scheme is offered by my Department in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and is supported by the InnovFin SME Guarantee facility. The scheme is operated by the SBCI.

It currently makes available a fund of up to €200 m to eligible businesses that have been negatively affected by impacts arising from the outbreak of Covid-19 to enable those businesses to innovate, change or adapt in response to the current business environment. Following my further announcement on April 8 this Scheme is now being expanded to make available an additional €250 million in lending, which will bring the total amount of lending available under this Scheme to €450 million.

The Scheme is open to eligible SMEs and small mid-caps (businesses of up to 499 employees) negatively impacted by Covid-19. Loans under the Scheme range from €25,000 to €1.5m and are for periods of up to three years. The maximum interest rate under the scheme is 4% and loans of up to €500,000 are available unsecured.

The Scheme features a two-stage application process. Businesses must first confirm their eligibility with the SBCI. Successful applicants will be issued an eligibility reference number, which they can then use to apply for a loan with one of the participating finance providers. Approval of loans is subject to the finance providers' own credit policies and procedures.

Up to 4th May, there has been a total of 2,127 applications received to the COVID-19 WCS, of which 1,834 candidates were eligible, 9 ineligible and 284 applications are currently in process. Of the total approved, 299 were from food businesses. Of those sanctioned loans, 24 were to food businesses to a total value of €3.2m.

As expected, there is lag in seeing the volume of eligibility applications being translated into loan approvals. This is because the eligibility application and the loan approval are sequential, and there is due diligence required in assessing loans which does take time. However, the ramp up in loans being processed is now becoming more visible with 100 of the 156 loans approved under this scheme approved in the two weeks up to 4th May.

Future Growth Loan Scheme

565. Deputy Charlie McConalogue asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of farmers and food businesses that have applied to the future growth loan scheme since the Covid-19 crisis measures were introduced in March 2020; the number of farmers and such businesses that have been sanctioned financing to date; and the value of same in tabular form. [5833/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Future Growth Loan Scheme (FGLS) makes up to €300 million of loans available with a term of 8-10 years and is operated by the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) through participating lenders. My Department developed this scheme in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Finance provided under the scheme is competitively priced and offered at favourable terms, for example no security required for loans up to €500,000. We have seen strong demand for the scheme since its launch in April 2019 across all sectors and regions including in exporting businesses and family businesses.

The FGLS features a two-stage application process. Applicants must first confirm their eligibility under the scheme with the SBCI. The SBCI assesses the applications and successful candidates are issued an eligibility reference number.

Businesses can then use this number to apply for a loan under the scheme with one of the participating finance providers. Approval of loans is subject to the finance providers' own credit policies and procedures.

Up to 4 May, there has been a total of 3,449 applications for eligibility under the scheme, of which 3,286 have been approved for eligibility under the scheme. To date, 1043 loans have progressed to sanction to a total value of €222m (with further loans in the pipeline for sanctioning at one of the lenders).

The initial €300m funding for the FGLS has been almost fully subscribed, supporting a significant level of strategic investment by businesses. On 8 April, I announced a further expansion of this scheme and my Department is now working through the details of a significant expansion to bring this funding to market as soon as possible.

The table below provides details of eligibility applications and loans progressed to sanction under this scheme by farmers and food businesses up to 4 May 2020. It also provides the details of eligibility applications by farmers and food businesses since March 23rd 2020.

While there is some remaining capacity in the scheme through one of the financial providers, this lender does not lend to farmers. However, those farmers and food businesses that have applied for, and received approval for an eligibility code for the FGLS since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis will be in a position to proceed directly to the financial providers to seek loan approval when the new tranche of lending which I have announced becomes available under this scheme.

	From April 2019 to 04/05/2020	Since 23 March 2020
Total Eligible Applications	3286	241
Farmers Eligibility Application	1046	19
Food Business Eligibility Applications	367	29
Total Loans No.	1043	13
Total Loans Value	€222,100,000	€4,200,000
Farmers Loan No.	422	2
Farmers Loan Value	€51,800,000	€200,000
Food Companies No.	87	0
Food Companies Loan Value	€24,900,000	0

Covid-19 Pandemic

566. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the phase reopening bridal stores falls into; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5843/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Roadmap, phase one of which commenced on May 18th, sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available on www.gov.ie. The HSA will be the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, decide in which phase they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

Covid-19 Pandemic

567. Deputy Sean Fleming asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the advice which will be given to businesses such as hotels on the basis that the intended targets in relation to Covid-19 are reached regarding weddings and large social gatherings in hotels in November and December; if it is expected that there will be a limit on the number that can attend in view of the fact some persons have to plan accordingly and may not wish to proceed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5910/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Roadmap announced by Government on 1st May sets out the phases of reopening of the economy and society. The primary considerations in drawing up this Roadmap were public health concerns. The input and advice of National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) informed Government that the steps laid out in the Roadmap were the right steps to take at this time.

My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

The Roadmap is a living document and Government has the ability to change its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

As set out in the Roadmap document, the measures for Phase 4 are only an indication of what might happen if everything goes well with restricting the spread of COVID-19 in Ireland. They will only come into effect when the National Public Health Emergency Team says that the conditions are right for more relaxation of the restrictions in place to protect us all.

It is not possible at this time to predict what the limitation on group sizes will be in November and December and this will be reviewed closer to the time and in accordance with the over-riding principles set out in the Roadmap.

I understand that there is ongoing engagement by the Department of Transport, Tourism and

Sport with Fáilte Ireland and representatives of the hospitality sector for the purpose of addressing the challenges currently posed by COVID-19 for that sector. The outputs from those discussions will also inform any decisions to be taken by Government in relation to the convening of large gatherings in hotels in the context of the Government's Roadmap.

Workplace Safety

568. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her plans for ensuring compliance with the inevitable strict rules that will have to be put in place when persons return to work; her views on whether a dedicated compliance person in organisations above a certain size would be beneficial to ensure that new practices and habits are adhered to; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5923/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy will be aware, I launched the national "Return to Work Safely Protocol" Saturday, 9 May 2020.

The Protocol was drafted in close consultation with the social partners under the auspices of the Labour and Employer Economic Forum and agreed with them.

Under the Health, Safety and Welfare at Work Act, 2005, the HSA has full powers to oversee compliance with the health, safety and wellbeing of workers in their place of work. While COVID-19 is a public health issue, the infectious nature of the virus and the way in which it is easily transmitted through human contact, makes it a workplace health and safety issue as well as a general health matter. Neither health, safety nor welfare are narrowly defined in the 2005 Act, so the HSA has all of the powers that it needs.

While there are clear public health measures in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the Protocol is designed to translate these measures into a clear compliance framework designed for places of work. This is to help businesses to reopen so that workers can feel safe returning to work. The Health and Safety Authority will ensure compliance with the Protocol through a range of measures including advice, guidance, inspection and enforcement action as appropriate under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005.

The Protocol provides that within the workplace every employer will prepare a COVID-19 specific Response Plan and appoint at least one lead COVID-19 worker representative. The Protocol also provides that this Plan will be developed in consultation with workers. Existing safety representatives in the workplace appointed under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 2005, can play a valuable role in this regard. I am satisfied that this approach will ensure the necessary collaboration and co-operation between employers and employees who share the common goal of keeping workplaces safe.

Phase 1 of the reopening of the economy began on Monday last and, the HSA and other inspectors are out there advising and guiding employers on how to respect the Protocol. Helping businesses to comply is the overall goal of the HSA. However if, following an inspection, the inspector forms the opinion that further action is required, the appropriate action, up to and including the closure of a workplace, will be taken using the relevant powers. Where relevant, the public health authorities will be involved.

I am confident that the Protocol gives employers and employees the practical tools to reopen businesses, return to work safely and to operate in a safe manner as the phased re-opening of our economy kicks in in the months ahead.

Covid-19 Pandemic

569. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the instructions and guidelines being prepared for pub owners in preparation for an opening of the sector; if the number of customers per square metre is being addressed; the signage to be recommended; the hygiene protocols to be observed; if there will be an information pack provided addressing all of the questions and queries; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5936/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Covid-19 has brought unprecedented challenges for all of us in society, since the start of the pandemic, a key focus of Government has been to keep the supports provided for businesses under review and to continue to offer support as they work through the challenges facing them.

The Return to Work Safely Protocol is designed to support employers and workers to put measures in place that will prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace, as the economy begins to slowly open up, following the temporary closure of most businesses during the worst phase of the current pandemic. The national Return to Work Safely Protocol is designed to translate these measures into a clear compliance framework designed for places of work. This is to help businesses to reopen so that workers can feel safe returning to work. The Health and Safety Authority will ensure compliance with the Protocol through a range of measures including advice, guidance, inspection and enforcement action as appropriate under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005.

The Roadmap, phase one of which commenced on May 18th, sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available on www.gov.ie

The HSA will be the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

The National Standards Authority of Ireland's (NSAI) recently published COVID-19 Workplace Protection and Improvement Guide and the Covid-19 Retail Protection and Improvement Guide contain useful information that can be applied across many businesses.

Fáilte Ireland are currently preparing guidelines for the tourism sector in consultation with the tourism industry and relevant authorities.

The Government will continue to monitor the need for sectoral guides and should a need arise, I will work with my Department and Agencies to consider how we would best support or publish such a guide.

Health and Safety Inspections

570. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to ensure the HSA can carry out on-site inspections of workplaces as a result of complaints from workers over unsafe practices in regard to Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5969/20]

571. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to empower the HSA to close down workplaces that are in breach of Covid-19 safety guidelines and ensure the protection of employees; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5970/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 570 and 571 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, I launched the national “Return to Work Safely Protocol” Saturday, 9 May 2020.

The Protocol was drafted in close consultation with the social partners under the auspices of the Labour and Employer Economic Forum and agreed with them.

Under the Health, Safety and Welfare at Work Act, 2005, the HSA has full powers to oversee compliance with the health, safety and wellbeing of workers in their place of work. While COVID-19 is a public health issue, the infectious nature of the virus and the way in which it is easily transmitted through human contact, makes it a workplace health and safety issue as well as a general health matter. Neither health, safety nor welfare are narrowly defined in the 2005 Act, so the HSA has all of the powers that it needs.

As we have seen with the general public health measures that we have all been asked to observe, most people are complying with the rules. We can expect the same from employers and workers, most of who want to get back to work, and want the workplace to be safe, for them and for the families that they are returning to in the evenings. I am expecting employers and workers, in line with what is set out in the Protocol, to actively and jointly take responsibility for applying the clear measures set out in the Protocol, for the health and safety of all concerned. The HSA inspectors cannot be expected to go into every business in the country. That would be entirely unrealistic and unachievable. What they will do is a mix of unannounced inspections, along with providing advice and information through the HSA Workplace Contact Unit email and phonenumber. If, following contact from a worker, and engagement with the employer, they feel that an inspection is warranted, they will follow up with an on-site visit. However if, following an inspection, the inspector forms the opinion that further action is required, the appropriate action, up to and including the closure of a workplace, will be taken using the relevant powers. Where relevant, the public health authorities will be involved.

Question No. 572 answered with Question No. 547.

Labour Employer Economic Forum

573. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the

status of discussions at the Labour Employer Economic Forum regarding the national protocol on Covid-19 issues; and the number of meetings that have taken place for same. [5991/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The national “Return to Work Safely Protocol”, published on Saturday, 9 May 2020, was drafted in close consultation with the social partners including ICTU, Ibec, CIF and Chambers Ireland.

The Labour Employer Economic met several times in plenary and at official level, numerous bi-literal meetings and engagements took place during the development and sign off by all parties of the Protocol.

A high-level consultative stakeholder forum, under the aegis of LEEF, has been established to oversee the implementation of the Protocol as the economy opens up, in line with the Government’s Roadmap. The forum will include membership from the various bodies with responsibility for health and safety at work, and for public health more generally.

The Deputy should also be aware that regular contact between officials of my Department, the Department of Health, the Health and Safety Authority and the HSE continues at official level as businesses move to re-open and adapt to the provisions of the Protocol.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

574. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the details of each Covid-19 business support announced by her Department or State agency under her remit which will require primary legislation to be enacted to operationalise this support. [5992/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): On 2 May, I announced a number of additional measures to aid the economy as the COVID -19 restrictions start to be lifted. These are part of an economic plan worth up to €6.5 billion to help businesses impacted by COVID-19 and minimise the extent of the economic damage caused by the pandemic. Those measures are:

- A €10,000 Restart Grant for micro and small businesses based on a rates/waiver rebate from 2019;
- A three month commercial rates waiver for impacted businesses;
- A €2 billion Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund within the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF), which will make capital available to medium and large enterprises on commercial terms;
- A €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme to support lending to SMEs for terms ranging from 3 months to 6 years, which will be below market interest rates;
- The ‘warehousing’ of tax liabilities for a period of twelve months after recommencement of trading during which time there will be no debt enforcement action taken by Revenue and no interest charge accruing in respect of the warehoused debt.

The package aims to help our businesses to restart, reconnect and rehire staff. It includes grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs.

It will be necessary to enact legislation to give effect to some of these supports. The COVID

19 Miscellaneous Financing Provisions Bill 2020 will introduce Amendments to three Acts in order to support the financing needs of businesses in the COVID-19 crisis. These are the Microenterprise Loan Fund Act 2012 (as amended), the European Investment Fund Act 2018 and the Credit Guarantee Act 2012 (as amended).

The draft Heads of the Bill were submitted to the Office of Parliamentary Counsel on 6 May 2020. It is expected that this legislation will be ready for publication and consideration in the Oireachtas to coincide with the creation of a new Government.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

575. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the details of each item that will require primary legislation to be enacted following the business supports announced on 2 May 2020 (details supplied) to be operationalised. [5993/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): On 2 May, I announced a number of additional measures to aid the economy as the COVID -19 restrictions start to be lifted. These are part of an economic plan worth up to €6.5 billion to help businesses impacted by COVID-19 and minimise the extent of the economic damage caused by the pandemic. Those measures are:

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The package aims to help our businesses to restart, reconnect and rehire staff. It includes grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs.

It will be necessary to enact legislation to give effect to some of these supports. The COVID 19 Miscellaneous Financing Provisions Bill 2020 will introduce Amendments to three Acts in order to support the financing needs of businesses in the COVID-19 crisis. These are the Microenterprise Loan Fund Act 2012 (as amended), the European Investment Fund Act 2018 and the Credit Guarantee Act 2012 (as amended).

The draft Heads of the Bill were submitted to the Office of Parliamentary Counsel on 6 May 2020. It is expected that this legislation will be ready for publication and consideration in the Oireachtas to coincide with the creation of a new Government.

Covid-19 Pandemic

576. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if there is a mechanism or unit in her Department to enable businesses in various sectors impacted by Covid-19 restrictions to submit proposals which may comply with social distancing measures and reopen ahead of the timeline envisaged for their sector in the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business published on 1 May 2020. [5994/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can reopen under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website *gov.ie*.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or *wcu@hsa.ie*.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/> .

On 8 May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30th June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with em-

ployees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country. I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Covid-19 Pandemic

577. Deputy Robert Troy asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the guidance and advisory documents to be published by her Department or a State agency under her remit with regard to the reopening of businesses as Covid-19 restrictions are lifted; and the estimated publishing date for each such document in tabular form. [5995/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is the overarching guidance for employers and employees with regard to the reopening of businesses as COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

It is the result of a collaborative effort by my Department, the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), the Health Services Executive (HSE) and the Department of Health and is designed to support employers and workers to put measures in place that will prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace, when the economy begins to slowly open up, following the temporary closure of most businesses during the worst phase of the current pandemic.

This Protocol should be used by all workplaces to adapt their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures identified as necessary by the HSE and the Department of Health. It will operate in parallel with existing workplace health and safety statutory requirements.

The Protocol sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take before a workplace reopens, and while it continues to operate.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is an essential part of the move towards the gradual lifting of the current restrictions, re-opening businesses, getting people back to employment and re-igniting our economy.

The HSA has also produced the following guides:

COVID-19 – Advice for Employers and Employees

COVID-19 FAQs for Employers and Employees in relation to Home-Working on a temporary basis

COVID-19 Conformity Assessment and Market Surveillance procedures for PPE

Additional Business Continuity Information and Advice

Return to Work Safely Templates and Checklists.

These can all be found using the following link https://www.hsa.ie/eng/topics/covid-19/covid-19_coronavirus.html .

In addition to this, the National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI), which is an agency of my Department, has produced Guidance on Manufacturing and Importing PPE and Medical Devices and COVID-19 Retail Protection and Improvement Guide and these are available here <https://www.nsai.ie/covid-19/> .

In the context of NSAI's work on progressing guidance for various sectors across the economy, my Department is currently considering for which other sectors it may be appropriate to request NSAI to develop further guidance. The estimated dates for publication of such advisory documents are not yet available.

Covid-19 Pandemic

578. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she or her Ministerial colleagues are examining proposals for certain business sectors, for example, construction, hairdressers and barbers, restaurants and hospitality, to fully return to work under appropriate safety guidelines earlier than the timeline envisaged for their sector in the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, published on 1 May 2020; and the process for reviewing the timelines set for each sector in the document. [5996/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15th May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18th . This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Pro>

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The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie .

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/> .

On 8th May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30th June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to flex the plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Health and Safety Authority

579. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if additional resources, that is, staff and funding will be needed for the Health and Safety Authority with respect to the reopening of businesses as Covid-19 restrictions are lifted; if so, the exact number of staff and additional funding that will be required; the number of full and part-time staff employed in the HSA in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to date in 2020, by staff according to civil service grade and other staff; and the breakdown of funding allocated to the HSA in each of the years 2016 to 2020, in tabular form. [5997/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy will be aware, I launched the national “Return to Work Safely Protocol” Saturday, 9 May 2020.

From 2016 to date the HSA has had about 100 inspectors in the grade. Some of these are involved in the management and scheduling of inspections, and others are involved in carrying

out a range statutory activity including market surveillance of products (including PPE) and chemicals and investigations into workplace fatalities and accidents, so not all of these inspectors can be deployed in the field at the same time. However, the HSA is currently deploying all its available inspectors across sectors to carry out both spot checks and other inspections to check compliance with the Protocol. The HSA inspectorate will be supplemented significantly by deploying other inspectors from across the system who already have an environmental health, agriculture or other workplace/business inspection responsibilities. While details such as Service Level Agreements etc. are currently being finalised, I can say that the numbers of additional resources working with the HSA will be in the hundreds, from across the system. These will be specialist officials who already have sectoral business inspection or monitoring responsibilities. Compliance with the Covid Return to Work Safely Protocol will become part of their normal inspection regime. It will start shortly with some 200 or so officers from the Environmental Health Service, and this number will increase steadily as officials from other parts of the system, with varying sectoral inspection and oversight responsibilities are brought on board, in line with the Government Roadmap. I can assure you that the Government will not be found wanting in resourcing this important work.

As we have seen with the general public health measures over the past two months, most people are complying with the rules. We can expect the same from employers and workers, most of who want to get back to work, and want the workplace to be safe, for them and for the families that they are returning to in the evenings.

I am expecting employers and workers, in line with what is set out in the Protocol, to actively and jointly take responsibility for applying the clear measures set out in the Protocol, for the health and safety of all concerned.

Even with the enhanced cohort of inspectors available to the HSA, they cannot be expected to go into every business in the country. That would be entirely unrealistic and unachievable. What they will do is a mix of unannounced inspections, along with providing advice and information through the HSA Workplace Contact Unit email and phonenumber. wcu@hsa.ie and Tel: 1890 289 389.

Information on the current resources of the Health and Safety Authority is attached in tabular form.

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2020-05-20_pq579-20-05-20_en.docx] Table - Staff and Resources

National Standards Authority of Ireland

580. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if additional resources, that is, staff and funding will be needed for the NSAI with respect to the reopening of businesses as Covid-19 restrictions are lifted; if so, the exact number of staff and additional funding that will be required; the number of full and part-time staff employed in the NSAI in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to date in 2020 by staff according to civil service grade and other staff; and the breakdown in funding allocated to the NSAI in each of the years 2016 to 2020, in tabular form. [5998/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department maintains continuous engagement and oversight in relation to NSAI's exchequer financing, staffing and recruitment requirements. In response to the impact of Covid-19 on businesses, the NSAI are monitoring these requirements for 2020, and will bring any future

requirements to the attention of my Department if required.

The following table outlines the staffing numbers and the breakdown of funding for the NSAI over the years 2016-2020.

	Full time staff in NSAI	Part time staff in NSAI	Fixed term Contract	External Service Delivery	Other staffing*	Breakdown of Funding
2016	117	12	8	22	6	€4.6m
2017	125	13	17	17	5	€5.4m
2018	129	17	23	21	5	€5.7m
2019	143	16	11	18	8	€5.4m
2020	148	14	8	12	8	€6.8m

*Other staffing includes employees on secondment, Temporary Agency Staff and Intra students.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

581. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if specific supports will be provided to private bus operators to allow them to return to business as Covid-19 restrictions are eased; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6024/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I announced on April 8 a major expansion of supports for all businesses impacted by COVID-19.

The package is now worth €1 billion in liquidity measures including a new €180m Sustaining Enterprise Fund for firms in the manufacturing and international services sectors. Free mentoring and online training are also available for all SMEs. This package is a significant step-up in the supports available for all businesses in all sectors at this very difficult time. The measures have been developed to meet the varying needs of Irish enterprise and they are very specifically targeted by size, sector and need.

In addition to the new package of liquidity measures I announced are detailed below, the full range of Enterprise Ireland, IDA, Local Enterprise Office (LEO) and Údarás na Gaeltachta grant and advisory supports continue to be available to eligible firms to help with strategies to access finance, commence or ramp-up online trading activity, reconfigure business models, cut costs, innovate, diversify markets and supply chains and to improve competitiveness.

In that regard, Government will continue to explore funding potential for all enterprises including micro-enterprises as they work through the challenges facing them, including through any mechanisms allowable through the EU's state aid framework.

The key measures which constitute the €1 billion in liquidity measures as I announced are set out below.

The SBCI Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme was announced on 11 March and opened for eligibility applications on 23 March. The Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme is offered by my Department in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and is supported by the InnovFin SME Guarantee facility. The scheme is operated by the SBCI. It currently makes available a fund of up to €200 m to eligible businesses that have been negatively affected by impacts arising from the outbreak of Covid-19 to enable those businesses to innovate, change or adapt in response to the current business environment. Following my

further announcement on April 8 this Scheme is now being expanded to make available an additional €250 million in lending, which will bring the total amount of lending available under this scheme to €450 million.

Up to 4 May, there has been a total of 2,127 applications received to the COVID-19 WCS, of which 1,834 candidates were eligible, 9 ineligible and 284 applications are currently in process. Of those, 156 loans have progressed to sanction to a total value of €28.02m.

The Future Growth Loan Scheme makes up to €300 million of loans available with a term of 8-10 years and is operated by the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) through participating lenders. We have seen strong demand for the scheme since its launch in April 2019 across all sectors and regions including in exporting businesses and family businesses.

Up to 4 May, there has been a total of 3,449 applications for eligibility under the scheme, of which 3,286 have been approved for eligibility under the scheme. The initial €300m funding for the FGLS has been almost fully subscribed, supporting a significant level of strategic investment by businesses. On 8 April, I announced a further expansion of this scheme and my Department is now working through the details of a significant expansion to bring this funding to market as soon as possible.

A new €2,500 Business Continuity Voucher is available through Local Enterprise Offices and is designed for businesses across every sector that employ up to 50 people. It can be used by companies to develop short-term and long-term strategies to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic.

These measures are in addition to the €150m of funding capacity in the Government's Credit Guarantee Scheme.

For microenterprises (under 10 employees) and businesses with over 10 employees, Micro-finance Ireland (MFI) are administering special COVID-19 Loans, with an additional €13m in capital support bringing its total lending capacity up to €20m for the coming period. There is also a substantial reduction in interest rates on these loans from 7.8% to 4.5%. Loans can be made up to €50,000 with no repayments required and no interest charged in the first six months.

The €2,500 Trading Online Voucher Scheme for microenterprises is being expanded - an additional €3.3m is being provided to the scheme bringing the total available to €5.6m. The scheme is also being made more flexible - allowing businesses to apply for a second voucher of up to €2,500 where they have successfully utilised their first one; and allowing subscriptions to low-cost online retailing platform solutions to quickly establish a retailing presence online.

The €180m Sustaining Enterprise Fund is specifically aimed at all firms with 10 or more employees in the manufacturing and international services sectors impacted by COVID-19 that are vulnerable but viable. The Fund will be operated by Enterprise Ireland, providing repayable advances of up to €800,000 as agreed with the EU under new State Aid rules and, together with leveraged lending from the financial markets, should see up to €500m of additional investment in vulnerable but viable firms. These grants will only be repayable if and when a business returns to financial good health.

A Business Financial Planning Grant from Enterprise Ireland to the value of €5,000 to assist companies to develop a Business Sustainment Plan and to engage the services of an approved Financial Consultant.

A new €2,500 LEAN Business Improvement Grant from Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland to help companies quickly access expertise to review and optimise operations at a time of crisis and identify the key measures needed to ensure continued viability.

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A new €2m Online Retail Scheme from Enterprise Ireland will be open to retailers employing over 10 people. The objective of the Scheme is to support companies in the indigenous retail sector with a pre-existing online presence to respond to both the domestic and international consumer demand for a competitive online offer. Grants ranging from €10,000 to €40,000 will be awarded under the competitive scheme.

On Saturday 2 May last, I also announced a further suite of measures to support small, medium and larger business that are negatively impacted by Covid-19 with Minister Paschal Donohoe, T.D., Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform and Minister Eoghan Murphy, T.D., Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government. This package of support followed the publication of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business, which sets out a five-stage plan to ease the Covid-19 restrictions and reopen Ireland's economy and society. The new measures we announced included:

- A €10,000 restart grant for micro and small businesses based on a rates/waiver rebate from 2019;

- A three-month commercial rates waiver for impacted businesses;

- A €2 billion Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund within the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF), which will make capital available to medium and large enterprises on commercial terms;

- A €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme to support lending to SMEs for terms ranging from 3 months to 6 years, which will be below market interest rates;

- The 'warehousing' of tax liabilities for a period of twelve months after recommencement of trading during which time there will be no debt enforcement action taken by Revenue and no interest charge accruing in respect of the warehoused debt; and,

- A commitment to local authorities to make up the rates shortfall, so that local authorities can continue provide full services to the public.

I can assure the Deputy that I continue to work with my colleagues across Government to examine further appropriate supports to assist businesses impacted by Covid-19.

My colleague, Minister Shane Ross T.D., Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport may be able to provide more specific guidelines or supports designed to suit private bus operators.

Covid-19 Pandemic

582. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will meet with representatives of cinema operators to ensure that reopening of cinemas occurs at the right time and with the right procedures. [6025/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15th May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18th . This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

I have not met with the representatives of cinema operators. However, I have regular engagement with the various business representative groups through my Department's Enterprise Forum on Covid-19 and the Retail Consultation Forum both of which I Chair. I will continue to maintain that dialogue with stakeholders so that we can work towards getting people back to work safely.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 8th May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30th June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country. I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

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A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Covid-19 Pandemic

583. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the steps she has taken to ensure that reopening of all sectors happen in tandem on an all-Ireland basis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6027/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday 18 May. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. The Roadmap will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

While there is close engagement with the Northern Ireland Authorities in a variety of forums on how to contain the virus, my Department does not have a remit in relation to deciding which sectors can reopen in Northern Ireland.

Questions Nos. 584 to 586, inclusive, answered with Question No. 520.

Employment Rights

587. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the recourse an employee has if they are of the view that Covid-19 workplace guidance is not being adhered to by the employer or in cases in which they view their health is being compromised by the working conditions in place; her views on whether it is appropriate in such a case for an employer to take enforcement action against that employee; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6093/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy will be aware, I launched the national “Return to Work Safely Protocol” Saturday, 9 May 2020. The Protocol was drafted in close consultation with the social partners under the auspices of the Labour and Employer Economic Forum and agreed with them.

The Protocol sets out the requirements for businesses and employers on the steps required to address the risks arising from COVID-19 public health protection measures in the workplace and all businesses are required to comply fully with the Protocol. It also sets out in very clear terms the steps that the employer and worker must take when a workplace reopens and while it continues to operate.

Compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol is being led by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), who have overall responsibility for ensuring the health, safety and welfare at work of all workers.

Employers and workers are required, in line with what is set out in the Protocol, to actively and jointly take responsibility for applying the clear measures set out in the Protocol, for the health and safety of all concerned. However, any worker with concerns about the manner in which public health measures are being adhered to at their place of work should bring these concerns to their employer and to the COVID-19 worker representative in the first instance and they can of course also contact the Health and Safety Authority Workplace Contract unit wcu@hsa.ie and Tel: 1890 289 389.

I am satisfied that the overall approach will ensure the necessary collaboration and co-operation between employers and employees who share the common goal of keeping workplaces safe.

Covid-19 Pandemic

588. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will meet with representatives of cinema operators to ensure that reopening of cinemas occurs at the right time and with the right procedures. [6096/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government’s Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15th May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18th . This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government’s website gov.ie.

I have not met with the representatives of cinema operators. However, I have regular engagement with the various business representative groups through my Department’s Enterprise Forum on Covid-19 and the Retail Consultation Forum both of which I Chair. I will continue to maintain that dialogue with stakeholders so that we can work towards getting people back to work safely.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 8th May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30th June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Covid-19 Pandemic

589. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation

if correspondence (details supplied) will be examined; when smaller tech hubs and co-working hubs in rural Ireland will be permitted to open during the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6119/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15th May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18th . This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

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The Protocol is available at <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

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In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/> .

On 8th May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30th June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country. I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Covid-19 Pandemic

590. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to adequately deal with businesses that are closed due to Covid-19 and that are unable to keep their terms of their commercial leases; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6132/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The issues businesses are facing in respect of commercial rents/leases have been raised with me through the Enterprise Forum and Retail Forum, both of which I chair, and other channels.

These are difficult times and many companies have had to temporarily close their businesses and/or premise(s), curtail their activities or make alternative work arrangements due to COVID-19 restrictions. I am keenly aware that some businesses, particularly in the retail sector, are concerned that some landlords are continuing to insist on the payment of rents and leases as normal despite their premises being closed.

At the same time, we must remember that landlords have their own financial obligations, like debt repayments, insurance or security costs, that still need to be paid. Where a landlord has debt in place, their flexibility will likely be driven by what their bank / lender will accept. The Minister for Finance raised the broader issue of rents in meetings with the pillar banks. He referenced this in his announcement of 18th March concerning an arrangement with the banks to the effect that any landlord who has agreed a deal with the banks on foot of the arrangement will be expected to pass the benefit on to their tenants. I reiterated this in the Dáil on 30th April last.

While commercial leases are primarily a contractual matter for the tenant and the landlord, the Government has urged landlords to demonstrate forbearance in these extraordinary times and to play their part, as everyone must, in helping the country through this difficult period. I would encourage tenants and landlords to engage with each other on this matter and come to some arrangement as it is in everybody's interest that terms are amicably agreed.

I have asked my officials to raise the matter of commercial rents and leases across a number of Government Departments. An initial inter-departmental discussion has already taken place and I understand further engagement is underway with a range of stakeholders, including groups representing businesses and landlords, to gain additional insights and gather intelligence to inform any further discussions. I have also asked my officials to look into the different responses from other countries and to identify possible options for supports.

While different options are being explored, I would point out that any support to business in respect of rents alone would ultimately end up as a support to the landlord. Not only would it be

difficult to estimate the costs involved for such a scheme, but the offering of support, or even the perception that such supports will be forthcoming, may affect the market and lessen the impetus for landlords to renegotiate with tenants.

The matter of legal protections for businesses who are unable to pay their commercial rents has been raised with the Attorney General. Specifically, I asked about the potential for legislation to prevent the eviction of commercial tenants who have failed to pay rent as a result of the pandemic and the possibility of legislating to place a moratorium on businesses having to pay rent for premises they cannot use due to the restrictions imposed by Government. I have just received a response in which the Attorney General advises that there are significant legal difficulties in respect to both of the questions posed. The difficulties stem from a variety of legal bases including statutory, constitutional, contract and common law. I have asked my officials to consider the advice.

The Government is committed to ensuring as many businesses as possible survive this challenging period, and it will continue to look at how we can support businesses that have been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. I would like to point out that, on 2nd May, the Government announced an additional suite of measures to further support small, medium and larger businesses that have been negatively impacted by Covid-19. These included:

- A €10,000 restart grant for micro and small businesses based on a rates waiver/rebate from 2019;

- A three-month commercial rates waiver for impacted businesses;

- A €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme to support lending to SMEs for terms ranging from 3 months to 6 years, which will be below market interest rates; - A €2 billion Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund within the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF), which will make capital available to medium and large enterprises on commercial terms; and

- The 'warehousing' of tax liabilities for a period of twelve months after recommencement of trading during which time there will be no debt enforcement action taken by Revenue and no interest charge accruing in respect of the warehoused debt.

These supports acknowledge that impacted businesses need time and space to restructure and resume activity, without the added pressures of trying to repay legacy debts, such as commercial rents, when revenues are just beginning to return.

Further information on all of these and additional Government supports for COVID-19 impacted businesses can be found at www.gov.ie or on my Department's website (<https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>).

Workplace Safety

591. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of staff in both the HSA and HSE attributed to deal with businesses that fail to adhere to Covid-19 guidelines. [6133/20]

623. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the requirements including the specific legal requirements that employers will have to meet under the National Return to Work Safely Protocol; the expected number of workplace inspectors that will be needed for implementation of this protocol; the number of inspectors employed by the Health and Safety Authority; the additional number that will be taken on for the remainder of

the Covid-19 period; and the estimated cost of additional staff resources. [6561/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 591 and 623 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, I launched the national “Return to Work Safely Protocol” Saturday, 9 May 2020.

The Protocol was drafted in close consultation with the social partners under the auspices of the Labour and Employer Economic Forum and agreed with them.

Under the Health, Safety and Welfare at Work Act, 2005, the HSA has full powers to oversee compliance with the health, safety and wellbeing of workers in their place of work. While COVID-19 is a public health issue, the infectious nature of the virus and the way in which it is easily transmitted through human contact, makes it a workplace health and safety issue as well as a general health matter. Neither health, safety nor welfare are narrowly defined in the 2005 Act, so the HSA has all of the powers that it needs.

The HSA is deploying all its available inspectors across sectors to carry out both spot checks and other inspections to check compliance with the Protocol. The HSA inspectorate will be supplemented significantly by deploying, under the authority of the HSA, other inspectors from across the system who already have an environmental health, agriculture or other workplace/business inspection responsibilities. As we have seen with the general public health measures over the past two months, most people are complying with the rules. We can expect the same from employers and workers, most of who want to get back to work, and want the workplace to be safe, for them and for the families that they are returning to in the evenings.

I am expecting employers and workers, in line with what is set out in the Protocol, to actively and jointly take responsibility for applying the clear measures set out in the Protocol, for the health and safety of all concerned.

Even with the enhanced cohort of inspectors available to the HSA, they cannot be expected to go into every business in the country. That would be entirely unrealistic and unachievable. What they will do is a mix of unannounced inspections, along with providing advice and information through the HSAs Workplace Contact Unit email and phonenumber.

If, following contact from a worker, and follow-up engagement with the employer, they feel that an inspection is warranted, they will follow up with an on-site visit.

Importantly, if, on foot of an inspection, the inspector forms the opinion that further action is required, the appropriate action - up to and including the closure of a workplace - will be taken using the relevant powers. Where relevant, the public health authorities will be involved.

Trade Strategy

592. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her views on whether there is a need to bring forward new measures to underpin the trade credit scheme; if she has met with the trade credit insurance companies; and if so, the progress made to date. [6135/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am aware of the significant impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on all businesses and this includes the private trade credit insurance market.

As a result of the significant economic shock, there is increased uncertainty regarding the financial performance of many companies in our economy. I understand that the trade credit insurance companies have had to adjust their coverage in response to this adverse economic environment.

In response the Government has already introduced a range of measures and supports to the economy in order to sustain and over time facilitate a return to a more normal trading environment. This in turn should permit the trade credit market to reconsider the risk environment and adjust their coverage as appropriate.

In addition my Department continues to consider further options for appropriate and effective assistance to businesses and this includes the possibility of supports to ensure the continued provision of credit insurance and the appropriate mechanism to do so.

My officials are engaging with the private trade credit insurance providers to determine whether specific support can be provided to this market and how this could complement other general supports provided by the Government.

Such support will be considered as part of the range of measures provided to businesses.

This is an ongoing process.

Examinership Arrangements

593. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the progress being made on amending the examinership legislation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6136/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department is progressing, with the Company Law Review Group (CLRG), proposals for amendments to the Companies Act to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on business. Among them are a range of proposals relating to the examinership process.

Examinership remains very relevant in the context of preserving viable businesses and protecting jobs. It is a managed process that includes the interests of customers, creditors, suppliers, employees and staff. Any changes to our long standing examinership process must be pursued in a manner that guards against unintended consequences, particularly as these consequences could be adverse for other companies, employees and the Exchequer.

The CLRG is a statutory body charged with advising me on all matters pertaining to company law to promote enterprise and enhance corporate governance. Membership of the CLRG is wide and representative of the broad range of stakeholders with an interest in company law, including representatives for small business, ISME and the SFA. This group is ideally positioned to fully consider the many issues arising from a unique wide-ranging perspective.

This work is being prioritised by all involved and I expect to have an update from the CLRG shortly, once deliberations have concluded.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

594. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her views on cases in which workers are told their company is accessing the WSS and in which this

results in a payment significantly below the PUP €350 or the regular jobseeker's payment due to the fact the calculation is based on earnings for January and February 2020 and the workers concerned may have had little net earnings due to the fact their work is seasonal in nature; the remedy open to workers in this situation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6154/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy will be aware this is a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Finance.

I understand that the legislation underpinning the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is contained in Section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020. Of necessity, the legislation and the scheme itself were developed very quickly to support the urgent Government objective of getting much needed assistance to employers and employees that have been seriously affected by the pandemic.

The TWSS builds on data returned to Revenue through its real-time PAYE system. It must be accepted that the underlying legislation and the scheme itself simply cannot be tailored to meet every individual unique set of circumstances for either employers or employees.

The core principles of the scheme, as prescribed in the underlying law, are that –

- the business is suffering significant negative economic impact due to the pandemic,
- the employees were on the payroll at 29 February 2020, and
- the employer had fulfilled its PAYE reporting obligations for February 2020 by 15 March 2020.

The changes to Revenue's systems required to fully implement the TWSS have been delivered incrementally since the scheme commenced on 26 March 2020. The latest phase of the scheme implements the revised subsidy rates, as determined by the Minister for Finance, in accordance with the legislation and is effective from 4 May 2020 for most employees. This phase is based on providing employers with details of the maximum personal subsidy amount to be paid to individual employees based on their previous average net weekly pay.

On 15 April 2020, the Minister for Finance announced further updates to the TWSS. Included in the updates were measures to increase the wage subsidy for certain lower paid employees. In effect, for those employees with previous net pay of less than €586 per week, the amount of the temporary wage subsidy shall not exceed €410 per week in accordance with the following principles:

- an 85% subsidy shall be payable in the case of employees whose average net weekly pay does not exceed €412; and
- a flat rate subsidy of up to €350 shall be payable in the case of employees whose average net weekly pay is more than €412 but not more than €500.

In addition, where an employer wishes to pay a greater level of top-up, in respect of employees with net pay of less than €412 per week, in order to bring the employee's pay to €350 per week, then tapering would not be applied to the subsidy.

These changes to the TWSS mean that more employees will now receive a subsidy of €350 per week, and those with previous net pay below €412 per week will now receive a greater level of subsidy.

These new rates have been fully operational for payroll submissions made on or after 4 May

2020, with a pay date on or after that same date.

The changes announced allow the concentration of resources to protect incomes, in a proportionate way having regard to available resources, employer contribution and the broader suite of COVID-19 related supports put in place by the Government.

Currently, the Minister for Finance has no plans to change the average wage calculation to a different period.

Industrial Development

595. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if construction works on a new advanced technology unit at Knockaconny, County Monaghan has commenced; the expected duration of such works; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6244/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department and the IDA are working hard to attract further investment to County Monaghan, despite the challenges presented by Covid-19. As the Deputy is aware, the next phase of the IDA's Regional Property Programme (RPP) includes plans for an Advanced Technology Unit (ATU) at Knockaconny in the County.

I was pleased to turn the sod on this building in December, marking the beginning of construction. Whilst the project was initially scheduled for completion in December 2020, construction has been temporarily put on hold on account of Covid-19. The timeline for the resumption of work remains dependent on public health advice and the facility's completion date will be revised accordingly.

In addition to the RPP, the IDA continues to target further investment for Monaghan and the wider region through its regional office in neighbouring Cavan. As part of its strategy to promote the area, the IDA is focusing on the specific sectors of agri-food, manufacturing, tourism and internationally traded services. The Agency's staff regularly engage with key stakeholders on the ground in Monaghan - including local authorities, public bodies, the education sector and companies from both its own client base and the indigenous sector - as part of efforts to generate new investment.

More broadly, the level of foreign direct investment in County Monaghan continues to improve. From 2017 to 2019, Monaghan reported a twofold increase in employment by IDA Ireland client companies with 168 net new jobs added during this period. I am confident that the new ATU in Knockaconny will stimulate further investment and job creation for the people of Monaghan and the wider Border region.

Covid-19 Pandemic

596. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when businesses such as gyms or personal training operations can resume; if open air exercise training for groups of four or less can operate from 18 May 2020 in outdoor spaces; the part of phase two which refers to small retail outlets; and if this phase includes personal training which can take place on a one to one basis by appointment only. [6268/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking

the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15th May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18th . This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie .

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/> .

On 8th May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30th June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to flex the plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Health and Safety Regulations

597. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the reason the public health workplace measures are guidelines and not mandatory (details supplied). [6279/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy will be aware, I launched the national “Return to Work Safely Protocol” Saturday, 9 May 2020.

The Protocol was drafted in close consultation with the social partners under the auspices of the Labour and Employer Economic Forum and agreed with them.

Under the Health, Safety and Welfare at Work Act, 2005, the HSA has full powers to oversee compliance with the health, safety and wellbeing of workers in their place of work. While COVID-19 is a public health issue, the infectious nature of the virus and the way in which it is easily transmitted through human contact, makes it a workplace health and safety issue as well as a general health matter. Neither health, safety nor welfare are narrowly defined in the 2005 Act, so the HSA has all of the powers that it needs.

The Protocol is applicable to all industry sectors, setting minimum standards and is not designed to prohibit the introduction of further specific measures in particular sectors or workplaces, as long as they enhance the measures set out in the Protocol. The Protocol is a living document.

While there are clear public health measures in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the Protocol is designed to translate these measures into a clear compliance framework designed for places of work. This is to help businesses to reopen so that workers can feel safe returning to work.

Phase 1 of the reopening of the economy began on Monday last, the HSA and other inspectors are out there advising and guiding employers on how to respect the Protocol. Helping businesses to comply is the overall goal of the HSA. However if, following an inspection, the inspector forms the opinion that further action is required, the appropriate action, up to and including the closure of a workplace, will be taken using the relevant powers. Where relevant, the public health authorities will be involved.

Health and Safety Authority

598. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of inspectors the HSA has to inspect workplaces to ensure they are compliant with Covid-19 public health measures; the number of additional inspectors which it will need to recruit in order to respond to inspections; if consideration has been given to bringing trade unions under the HSA regulation (details supplied); if not, the reason therefor; and if the proposal been

discussed with the trade union movement. [6280/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Compliance with the national Return to Work Safely Protocol is being led by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), who have overall responsibility for ensuring the health, safety and welfare at work of all workers.

The Protocol was drafted in close consultation with the social partners under the auspices of the Labour and Employer Economic Forum and agreed with them.

The HSA is deploying all its available inspectors across sectors to carry out both spot checks and other inspections to check compliance with the Protocol. The HSA inspectorate will be supplemented significantly by deploying, under the authority of the HSA, other inspectors from across the system who already have an environmental health, agriculture or other workplace/business inspection responsibilities. As we have seen with the general public health measures over the past two months, most people are complying with the rules. We can expect the same from employers and workers, most of who want to get back to work, and want the workplace to be safe, for them and for the families that they are returning to in the evenings.

I am expecting employers and workers, in line with what is set out in the Protocol, to actively and jointly take responsibility for applying the clear measures set out in the Protocol, for the health and safety of all concerned.

Even with the enhanced cohort of inspectors available to the HSA, they cannot be expected to go into every business in the country. That would be entirely unrealistic and unachievable. What they will do is a mix of unannounced inspections, along with providing advice and information through the HSAs Workplace Contact Unit email and phonenumber wcu@hsa.ie and Tel: 1890 289 389.

Construction Regulations

599. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the consideration given to and the measures put in place in order to prevent construction workers outside the family unit traveling by cars and vans to their workplace when the construction sector returns to work on 18 May 2020 in view of the risk of contagion from Covid-19. [6282/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The national “Return to Work Safely Protocol” provides a clear compliance framework for all places of work to ensure that businesses can re-open and workers can return to work safely. The Protocol was drafted in close consultation with the social partners under the auspices of the Labour and Employer Economic Forum and agreed with them.

The Protocol is a detailed guide for employers and workers and sets out the mandatory minimum requirements that need to be in place to enable a workplace to open and to remain open. The Protocol states that workers should be encouraged to travel alone if using their personal cars for work or at a maximum be accompanied by one passenger who shall be seated in adherence with physical distancing guidance.

In addition, the construction sector has developed its own detailed COVID-19 return to work plan that captured many of the measures in the Protocol. I have been assured that the CIF operating procedure report has been amended to fully reflect the occupational health and safety actions required by the Return to Work Safely Protocol. I welcome the level of detail in the CIF operating procedure document which is specific to the construction sector and covers the use of

vehicles in the sector.

My expectation is that employers and workers, in line with what is set out in the Protocol, to actively and jointly take responsibility for applying the clear measures set out in the Protocol to ensure the health and safety of all concerned is protected.

Health and Safety Authority

600. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of inspectors employed by the Health and Safety Authority in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to date in 2020; if additional inspectors will be hired in view of the Covid-19 pandemic; if the HSA will receive additional funding in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6304/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The number of (wholetime equivalents) inspectors employed by the HSA in each of the years 2016 to end of April 2020 is as follows:

2016:	95.5
2017:	93.5
2018:	103.5
2019:	99.0
2020 (end April):	104.5

(Apart from 2020, the numbers shown were those employed at 31 December of the relevant year)

The Authority has a full staff complement of 182 which is made up of staff in administration and inspector grades. The inspector grades comprise of Grade 1s (senior inspectors) as well as GII and GIII inspectors. Inspectors operate across all our mandates – occupational health and safety, market surveillance of products and chemicals. They may also be involved in either general inspection, specialist inspection or policy implementation at national, European and international level.

The HSA inspectorate will be supplemented significantly by deploying, under the authority of the HSA, other inspectors from across the system who already have an environmental health, agriculture or other workplace/business inspection responsibilities. The HSA is deploying all its available inspectors on Covid19 inspections.

As we have seen with the general public health measures over the past two months, most people are complying with the rules. I expect the same from employers and workers, most of who want to get back to work, and want the workplace to be safe, for them and for the families that they are returning to in the evenings.

The HSA's 2020 current Budget allocation is €20.502m which compromises pay, non-pay and pensions related funding.

Covid-19 Pandemic

601. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if small and medium companies supplying protective equipment to hospitals are deemed essential workers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6334/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Government advice provides that the manufacture of work-wear apparel or footwear and the manufacture of products necessary for the supply chain of essential services are deemed to be essential services. Further details are set out in <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/dfeb8f-list-of-essential-service-providers-under-new-public-health-guidelin/#manufacturing> Employers are requested to refer to this guidance to decide whether their organisation is providing an essential service; it is not necessary to seek official authorisation

The supply of protective equipment is a very important part of assisting our frontline staff in fighting the Coronavirus and we welcome the contribution all such companies are making in the production of such supplies.

Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement

602. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of staff in the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to date in 2020, by account, administrative staff, legal personnel and other staff in tabular form; the amount of funding allocated to the ODCE in each of the years 2016 to 2019; the allocation for 2019; the amount expended in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to date in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6346/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The reply is as follows:

No. of staff¹ serving in the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement (ODCE) (2016-2020)

GRADE	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Director	1	1	1	1	1
Corporate Compliance Manager	0	0	0	0	0
Legal Adviser	2	1	-	-	-
Principal Solicitor	1	0	-	-	-
Enforcement Portfolio Manager	-	2	2	2	2
Enforcement Lawyer (PO)	-	-	-	-	2
Digital Forensic Specialist	-	1	1	1	1
Principal Officer	1	1	1	1	1
Professional Accountant Grade 1	5	5	7	4	4
Solicitor	1	1	1	1	1
Assistant Principal Officer	3	3	4	3	3
Higher Executive Officer	8	7	8	9	8
Executive Officer	5	6	6	6	6
Clerical Officer	8	7	8	8	8

GRADE	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total	35	35	39	36	37
Gardai 2	5	7	7	7	7

1. Refers to number of people not FTE's (i.e. not Full Time Equivalents where 2 people working a week on, week off pattern would equal 1 FTE)

2. A staff complement of 7 Gardai is assigned to the ODCE to assist with its criminal investigation / prosecution functions.

Table below sets out the allocations and outturn as requested:

Office of Director of Corporate Enforcement:

REV Allocations	Pay (€,000)	Non-Pay (€,000)	Total (€,000)	Outturn (€,000)
2016	2,808	2,207	5,015	2,728
2017	2,838	2,057	4,895	3,014
2018	3,000	2,057	5,057	3,702
2019	3,740	2,317	6,057	4,300
2020	3,740	2,317	6,057	1,267*

*Provisional figure

There are currently four vacancies in the ODCE, one Corporate Compliance Manager and three Forensic Accountants.

In relation to the post of Corporate Compliance Manager, the current Director is considering this as part of a significant restructuring of the ODCE that he has undertaken to better reflect the organisation's needs in the context of both its strategic shift towards deploying resources towards more serious indications of wrongdoing and the increasingly complex environment within which the ODCE operates.

That restructuring has included the seeking of sanction for the recruitment of a substantial number of additional professional staff, and following receipt of sanction, the recruitment of eight accounting professionals (one of whom was promoted to Enforcement Portfolio Manager), two Enforcement Portfolio Managers and a Digital Forensics Specialist, together with significant investment in a digital forensics laboratory, training and development. The recruitment and assimilation of a large number of new professional staff into a multi-disciplinary organisation that undertakes complex work in a fast-moving environment is a project that requires careful management. As such, the Director is of the view that it is preferable to allow that process to fully bed down before filling the Corporate Compliance manager vacancy. The Director is further conscious of the fact that the transition of the ODCE to an independent Agency will give rise to additional expertise requirements and, as such, is of the view that it is prudent that those considerations should be factored into developing the role, and associated skill set, required of the appointee.

My Office is actively engaging with PAS in relation to filling the Professional Accountant Grade 1 posts.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

603. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the

number of businesses by county which have drawn down Covid-19 loans according to each loan type available in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6349/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The SBCI Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme opened for eligibility applications on 23 March. The scheme is offered by my Department in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The scheme is operated by the SBCI through participating finance providers. It currently makes available a fund of up to €200m to eligible businesses that have been negatively affected by impacts arising from the outbreak of Covid-19 to enable those businesses to innovate, change or adapt in response to the current business environment. Following my announcement on 8 April, this scheme is now being expanded to make available an additional €250m in lending, which will bring the total amount of lending available under this scheme to €450m.

There has been strong appetite for the scheme such that as of 10 May 2020, there have been a total of 2,118 applications received to the COVID-19 WCS, of which 2,017 candidates were eligible and 13 ineligible. 88 applications are currently in process. Of those, 189 loans have progressed to sanction to a total value of €33.03 million.

Based on data currently available, Table 1 of the attached document provides details of the first €21.26 million of loan approvals under this scheme by county. Due to the newness of the scheme, drawdown data is not yet available.

The Future Growth Loan Scheme makes up to €300 million of loans available with a term of 8-10 years and is operated by the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) through participating lenders. We have seen strong demand for the scheme since its launch in April 2019, resulting in a rapid take up of the scheme.

As at 8 May 2020, the scheme has received 3,502 eligibility applications, with 3,327 approved, 160 currently in process and 16 deemed ineligible. The initial €300m funding for the FGSL scheme has been almost fully subscribed, supporting a significant level of strategic investment by businesses. One of the participating financial providers lenders has remaining capacity and businesses seeking loan approval are being directed towards this lender.

On 8 April 2020, I announced that this scheme would be expanded by a further €200m to facilitate longer-term lending to Covid-19-impacted businesses and my Department is working through the details of this expansion and will bring this funding to market as soon as possible.

Based on data available for the first €93.047 million of loans drawn down under the Future Growth Loan Scheme, 100% of these were by SMEs. Table 2 of the attached document provides details of €93.047 million worth of loans drawn down under this scheme on a per-county basis.

The Covid-19 Loan available from Microfinance Ireland (MFI) was introduced as a support to microenterprises to help them access funding during the Covid-19 crisis. Microenterprises are enterprises with less than ten employees.

These loans are available for eligible microenterprises responding to Covid-19-related difficulties, the negative impact of which must be a minimum of 15% of actual or projected income or profit. Loans up to €50,000 are available with terms that include a six months interest free and repayment free moratorium, with the loan to then be repaid over the remaining 30 months of the 36-month loan period. These loans are available at an interest rate of 4.5% to all microenterprises where the application is made through the Local Enterprise Network or referred by a bank or Local Development Committees. An interest rate of 5.5% is applied to loans which are sought directly from MFI.

Table 3 of the attached document provides a breakdown by county of loans sanctioned and drawn down under this scheme.

The Credit Guarantee Scheme is available to Covid-19 impacted businesses, it supports loans up to €1 million for periods of up to 7 years. The Scheme offers a partial Government guarantee of 80% to banks against losses on qualifying loans to eligible SMEs. The scheme is designed to support a range of debt products appropriate to the borrowing needs of SMEs. Term loans and other products such as stocking facilities, performance bonds will be covered by the Scheme.

The interest rate charged on the loan will be the banks' SME lending rates. In addition, the borrower pays a premium which partially covers the cost of providing the guarantee. The premium can vary but is currently 0.5%. It may be possible to avail of between a three to six-month interest-only payment period, but this depends on the lender's assessment of the application.

An application to access the Credit Guarantee Scheme can be made through one of the participating lenders which are currently Allied Irish Banks, Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank Ireland. The Scheme is operated by SBCI, the Department plays no role in the application or decision-making process, which, is fully delegated to the participating lenders. The Credit Guarantee Scheme facilitates guarantees up to a maximum of €150 million in any one year.

There have been no approved facilities arising from Covid-19 submitted to SBCI from financial providers.

On 2 May, Government also agreed a new €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme as a further development of the existing Credit Guarantee Scheme already available from AIB, BOI and Ulster Bank. This scheme forms a major component of the government's strategy to aid SMEs in these difficult times by providing critical support to ensure businesses are facilitated in having access to credit facilities to assist a return to a more regular trading environment. It will provide an 80% guarantee on lending to SMEs until the end of this year, for terms between 3 months and 6 years. The guarantee can be used for a wide range of lending products between €10,000 and €1 million that have a maximum term of 6 years or less. The Scheme will be available to all SME sectors, including primary producers and will have interest rates below current market rates. The implementation of this Scheme will require legislation, the drafting of which has been approved by Government.

I can assure the Deputy that I continue to work with my colleagues across Government to examine further supports to assist businesses impacted by Covid-19.

[Covid-19 schemes by county]

Question No. 604 answered with Question No. 545.

Covid-19 Pandemic

605. Deputy Louise O'Reilly asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when chiropractors can reopen; and if they can reopen earlier if they implement precautions and use PPE and ensure the protection of the health and safety of patient and practitioner. [6374/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap

sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website *gov.ie*.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 8 May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30 June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to flex the plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Covid-19 Pandemic

606. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when a business (details supplied) will be able to be reopened under the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6416/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHEET). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website *gov.ie*.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbei.gov.ie/>

On 8 May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30 June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country. I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Health and Safety Authority

607. Deputy Mairéad Farrell asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the way in which the Health and Safety Authority will fulfil its role in enforcing worker safety for employments as per the return to work safely protocol; the additional resources which will be provided to ensure random inspections of workplaces in order to assess the implementation of safeguards; the number of HSA workplace inspectors employed; her plans for an increase of such inspectors to adequately address the implementation of worker safety protocols; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6423/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol is being led by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), who have overall responsibility for ensuring the health, safety and welfare at work of all workers.

The HSA is deploying all its available inspectors across sectors to carry out both spot checks and other inspections to check compliance with the Protocol. The HSA inspectorate will be supplemented significantly by deploying, under the authority of the HSA, other inspectors from across the system who already have an environmental health, agriculture or other workplace/business inspection responsibilities. As we have seen with the general public health measures over the past two months, most people are complying with the rules. We can expect the same from employers and workers, most of who want to get back to work, and want the workplace to be safe, for them and for the families that they are returning to in the evenings.

Even with the enhanced cohort of inspectors available to the HSA, they cannot be expected to go into every business in the country. That would be entirely unrealistic and unachievable. What they will do is a mix of unannounced inspections, along with providing advice and information through the HSAs Workplace Contact Unit email and phonenumber.

Phase 1 of the reopening of the economy began on Monday last and, the HSA and other inspectors are out there advising and guiding employers on how to respect the Protocol. Helping businesses to comply is the overall goal of the HSA. However if, following an inspection, the inspector forms the opinion that further action is required, the appropriate action, up to and including the closure of a workplace, will be taken using the relevant powers. Where relevant, the public health authorities will be involved.

All matters will be kept under review as the phased re-opening of the economy gets underway over the coming weeks.

Work Permits

608. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if her Department is considering reviewing the current work permits regime in view of Covid-19. [6428/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The employment permits system is designed to facilitate the entry of appropriately skilled non-EEA nationals to fill skills and/or labour shortages, however, this objective must be balanced by the need to ensure that there are no suitably qualified Irish/EEA nationals available to undertake the work and that the shortage is a genuine one.

In order to ensure that the employment permits system is responsive to changes in economic circumstances and labour market conditions, it is managed through the operation of the Critical Skills Occupations List and the Ineligible Occupations List for the purpose of granting an employment permit which are subject to twice yearly reviews. These reviews are evidence based and are guided by research undertaken by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) and the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) in SOLAS, a public consultation process, input from the relevant Government Departments and the Economic Migration Inter-Departmental Group, chaired by the Department. Account is also taken of contextual factors such as Brexit and , in the current context, COVID 19.

Clearly the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to severely impact our economy, will cause us to look closely at the evolving challenges that present in the labour market for some time to come. Based on the evidence, submissions received, consultation with key stakeholders and the input of the Interdepartmental Group any changes proposed to the employment permits regime will be submitted for my consideration and approval.

A fundamental review of Economic Migration Policy, in 2018, indicated that the employment permits system, while providing a robust basis for the management of economic migration, the current legislation imposed a degree of inflexibility on the operation of the system. The review overseen by the Economic Migration Interdepartmental Group, included a public consultation process and an international benchmarking exercise. The Review's recommendations included the drafting of a new bill to adjust the legislative structure of the system, to allow for swift responses to changes in labour supply and demand, or employment practices. Government approval has been secured for the General Scheme and work has commenced on the development of the legislation.

Employment Rights

609. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the

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EU regulation pertaining to the movement of seasonal workers to different countries from within the EU; if guidance has been issued at EU level in view of Covid-19 in this area; and the steps taken to ensure that workers laid off due to the pandemic are given the opportunity to take up such employment should they wish. [6429/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I would advise the Deputy that EU/EEA workers do not fall within the policy remit of my Department.

The European Commission on 30th March 2020 issued guidelines on the free movement of critical workers, including those in agri-food.

I am advised that officials of my colleagues, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection are working closely on a recruitment campaign to support enlisting a large number of temporary workers for the Horticulture sector from the live register. This campaign is underway and timed for the fruit harvest peaking mid-May to Mid-June and Vegetable harvest from Mid-June.

Covid-19 Pandemic

610. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she or her Department were contacted by any of the contractors involved in the construction of a new factory (details supplied) regarding the continued construction work at the site during the period of the Covid-19 restrictions. [6437/20]

611. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if her attention has been drawn to or if she has been contacted regarding the full reopening of a construction site (details supplied) on 11 May 2020 a week before the agreed reopening date for construction on 18 May 2020 and prior to the Return to Work Protocol from her Department and the HSE being distributed to and discussed with employees on the site. [6438/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 610 and 611 together.

The issue of construction works at the site in question is an operational matter for the companies concerned. I understand that the Deputy along with his colleagues Deputies Bríd Smith, Richard Boyd Barrett and Gino Kenny contacted the Chief Executive Officer of the Health and Safety Authority on May 10th and my office was included as a recipient in this email correspondence. I can confirm, however, that I have not been contacted by any of the contractors in question and neither, to the best of my knowledge, has my Department.

More broadly, as we begin the process of gradually easing restrictions on different parts of our economy, I understand that many construction firms are adapting construction sites so that future works can adhere to provisions on social distancing and employee safety. I expect these measures to be in line with all relevant Government guidelines and the Return to Work Safely Protocol issued by my Department earlier this month.

Covid-19 Pandemic

612. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will call for the closure of a construction site (details supplied) until a full Covid-19 risk assessment has been carried out and safety procedures are agreed for the site by the HSA, the

workplace and safety reps, the Covid-19 safety rep and trade union safety reps in accordance with the Return to Work Protocol and the HSE Covid-19 guidelines; and if the HSA will be instructed to inspect this site for breaches of the Return to Work Protocol and HSE Covid-19 safety guidelines and issue enforcement proceedings to ensure full compliance. [6439/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The inspection of workplaces and any actions arising from inspections are, in the first instance, an operational matter for the Health and Safety Authority. In deciding to carry out a workplace inspection, the Health and Safety Authority consider a number of factors, including receipt of complaints in relation to practices at a place of work.

I launched the Return to Work Safely on the 9th of May, prior to this the Construction Industry Federation produced an on-line induction course and a guidance document for the construction sector. This guidance was quickly amended to ensure it reflected the Return to Work Safely Protocol. I would expect the construction sector to abide by the rules set out in the Protocol.

Any concerns about potential breaches of occupational safety and health legislation at a specific place of work and/or in regard to adherence with the provisions of the national Return to Work Safely Protocol should be brought to the attention of the Health and Safety Authority by contacting its Workplace Contact Unit.

Workplace Safety

613. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she or her Department will specify in relation to page 2 of the Return to Work Protocol that the procedure for the selection and appointment of Covid-19 safety representatives will be carried out by the employees in a collective manner, as provided for in accordance with section 25 of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005. [6440/20]

614. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she or her Department will insert into the Covid-19 Return to Work Protocol a provision that an employer cannot penalise a worker that leaves a workplace due to the fact their health and safety is at risk, as provided for in section 27(3)(f) of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005. [6441/20]

615. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she or her Department will insert into page 16 or 17 of the Covid-19 Return to Work Protocol a provision that in the absence of appropriate Covid PPE, employees shall not proceed with tasks requiring Covid PPE until the appropriate PPE is provided by the employer. [6442/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 613 to 615, inclusive, together.

At the launch of the national Return to Work Safely Protocol it was emphasised that it was a “living document” and as such it is at all times open to amendment as public health advice from the Department of Health and HSE change so it may be necessary to adapt provisions within the protocol.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol explicitly states that the success of its provisions is dependent on co-operation between workers and employers, such co-operation to include regular engagement about the virus and the preventative measures in place within the workplace involved.

It should be noted Section 27 of The Health, Safety and Welfare Act, 2005 prohibits an employer from penalising or threatening to penalise an employee with respect to any terms or condition of his/her employment, where the employee is exercising any right under safety and health legislation.

The enforcement of Section 27 of the Health and Safety Act is a matter for the Workplace Relations Commission. Any employee who feels that their health and safety or employment rights have been breached in relation to Covid 19 in the workplace has recourse to the industrial mechanisms of the state.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol recognises that in order to copper fasten the co-operation between the employer and the worker the appointment of a dedicated worker representative to take the lead role in the implementation, monitoring and reporting on the agreed Covid-19 related measures within the workplace is necessary. Employers are required to ensure any workers allocated the role of lead Covid-19 representative has received appropriate training in order to carry out this role. This training will be in addition to and not in substitution of the compulsory induction Covid-19 training to be provided by employers to all their workers.

Appointment to the role of Covid-19 representative will be subject to the agreement of the employer that there can be no repercussions on the representative's employment status.

The Protocol does not relieve in anyway an employer of his or her responsibilities under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005, or Regulations made under the Act in regard to protection of the safety, health and welfare of their employees. Under this legislation employers must carry out an appropriate risk assessment and produce a related safety statement and make the appropriate details of these available to the relevant employees.

Covid-19 Pandemic

616. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if clarity will be provided on businesses and their reopening roadmap (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6454/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website *gov.ie*.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 8 May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30 June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to flex the plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

617. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when further details will be provided on the restart fund of €250 million for micro and small businesses which was announced on 2 May 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6458/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): On Friday, May 15 2020 the Government agreed details of the new €250m Restart Grant, which

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will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures.

The Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30 June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers.

The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, or a minimum payment of €2,000, whichever is the higher, and a maximum payment of €10,000. Those businesses with outstanding rates bills are also eligible to make an application if they meet the criteria.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online to local authorities from Friday 22 May. Processing of applications and payment of the Restart Grant will depend on the initial surge of applications but, as far as is feasible, will be prioritised according to scheduled re-opening dates in the national Roadmap.

To avail of the Restart Grant, a business must be in the Local Authorities Commercial Rates Payment System and:

1. have an annual turnover of less than €5m and employ between 1 to 50 people;
2. have closed and/or suffered a projected 25%+ loss in turnover to end June 2020;
3. commit to remain open or to reopen if it was closed;
4. declare the intention to retaining employees that are on The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) and to reemploy staff on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment where applicable.

The grant can be used to defray ongoing fixed costs, for replenishing stock and for measures needed to ensure employee and customer safety.

This direct grant support is part of the wider €12bn package of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the Wage Subsidy Scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs.

Covid-19 Pandemic

618. Deputy Fergus O'Dowd asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her views on the measures highlighted in correspondence (details supplied) in respect of the future viability of a business; if a specific roadmap is being examined to protect local independent bookstores from being swallowed up by online stores as Ireland emerges from the Covid-19 crisis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6499/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am delighted to hear that so many of the Government initiatives to protect businesses, workers and the public have been beneficial to Mr. Dolan and I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country.

As Chair of the Retail Consultation Forum, I am acutely aware that COVID-19 has brought particular challenges for retailers, large and small, across the country. The work of the Forum will continue to focus on the future development and long-term viability of the retail sector, including considerations about town centre renewal and enhancement through the Framework

for Town Centre Renewal, in conjunction with the Department of Rural and Community Development and other relevant Departments, as well as through Project Ireland 2040.

The Government will continue to actively engage with business owners and representative bodies. Local Authorities, who have longstanding experience in dealing with ratepayers, are assessing the impact of COVID-19 by engaging directly with individual ratepayers, recognising that there may be impacts on sectors outside of those initially identified as being most under threat.

The supports announced on 2nd May include a three-month commercial rates waiver for impacted businesses and a restart grant for micro and small businesses based on a rates waiver/rebate from 2019.

These new supports acknowledge that affected businesses need time and space to restructure and resume activity, without the added pressures of trying to repay legacy debts, such as commercial rents, when revenues are just beginning to return.

Through the Enterprise Forum and Retail Forum, both of which I chair, I am hearing from stakeholders about these issues and I have asked my officials to raise the matter across a number of Government Departments.

I have also asked my officials to look into the different responses from other countries and to identify possible options for supports.

Mr. Dolan may be interested in talking to his Local Enterprise Office regarding the Trading Online Voucher Scheme which is available to all micro enterprises with less than 10 employees, including those in the retail sector. The €2,500 Trading Online Vouchers are a key Government grant to help small and micro enterprises, with very limited or no e-commerce presence, to get online, boost their sales and reach new markets – particularly during this difficult period, when so many small businesses are closed to the public.

However, the value of the Trading Online Voucher will stand to businesses for years to come, boosting revenue, and helping sustain and create jobs into the future.

The Voucher can be used towards adding payment facilities or booking systems to websites or developing new apps for customers, with co-funding from the business currently set at just 10 percent. The Voucher can also be used towards subscriptions to low-cost online retail platform solutions to help companies quickly establish a retailing presence online. Training and further business supports are also provided along with the Scheme.

Further details about the expanding Trading Online Voucher Scheme are available at <https://www.localenterprise.ie/Discover-Business-Supports/Trading-Online-Voucher-Scheme/>

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is designed to support employers and workers to put measures in place that will prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace, when the economy begins to re-open. The Protocol and other guidance and templates from the HSA are available here https://www.hsa.ie/eng/topics/covid-19/covid-19_coronavirus.html.

I am committed to supporting the needs of the retail sector in developing their viability, their online capability and enhancing their competitiveness.

Health and Safety Authority

619. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation

the number of field inspector posts recruited in each of the past three years; and the number that left during the same period. [6508/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): In my Department there are a number of staff assigned to work as Labour Inspectors (Executive Officer equivalent) within the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC). Labour Inspectors deliver an enforcement, and information service in relation to employer obligations and employee rights/entitlements/protectations.

In the past three years my Department has not recruited directly from open competitions to fill these posts. As vacancies arise through natural attrition, e.g. retirements and promotions, these posts have been filled, via internal competitions, with existing Departmental staff.

The table below sets out the number of Labour Inspectors who left, and the number who took up posts, during the years 2017, 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020:

Year	Number that left Post	Number that took up post
2017	3	7*
2018	4	5
2019	1	0
2020 (to date)	3	0

* This figure includes vacancies carried over from 2016

Local Enterprise Offices

620. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the estimated full-year cost if the budget for local enterprise offices increased by 20%; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6519/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): A 20% increase in the present LEO 2020 capital budget of €33.5 million would result in increasing the annual capital budget of the LEOs to €40.2 million. In general, Budgetary issues are managed in the context of any savings or otherwise that may or may not be generated on the Departmental Vote as the year progresses having regard to the usual financial procedures and the annual budgetary cycle.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

621. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the status of her discussions with the Ministers for Public Expenditure and Reform and Housing, Planning and Local Government with regard to the provision of a restart fund for micro and small businesses; when business owners can expect to apply; the anticipated turnaround times for an application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6556/20]

622. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if those businesses with outstanding rates or repayments schedule for rates owed will be eligible to access the proposed restart fund for small and micro businesses; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6559/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 621 and 622 together.

On Friday, May 15 2020 the Government agreed details of the new €250m Restart Grant, which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures.

The Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30 June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers.

The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, or a minimum payment of €2,000, whichever is the higher, and a maximum payment of €10,000. Those businesses with outstanding rates bills are also eligible to make an application if they meet the criteria.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online to local authorities from Friday 22 May. Processing of applications and payment of the Restart Grant will depend on the initial surge of applications but, as far as is feasible, will be prioritised according to scheduled re-opening dates in the national Roadmap.

To avail of the Restart Grant, a business must be in the Local Authorities Commercial Rates Payment System and:

1. have an annual turnover of less than €5m and employ between 1 to 50 people;
2. have closed and/or suffered a projected 25%+ loss in turnover to end June 2020;
3. commit to remain open or to reopen if it was closed;
4. declare the intention to retaining employees that are on The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) and to reemploy staff on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment where applicable.

The grant can be used to defray ongoing fixed costs, for replenishing stock and for measures needed to ensure employee and customer safety.

This direct grant support is part of the wider €12bn package of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the Wage Subsidy Scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs.

Question No. 623 answered with Question No. 591.

Health and Safety Authority

624. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the funding the Health and Safety Authority spent on all safety initiatives; the number of inspections it carried out in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6562/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The information requested by the Deputy is as follows:

Table of Health and Safety Authority inspections and investigations 2016 – 2020

Year	Total Inspections across all Sectors	Total Inspections and Investigations across all Sectors	Funding spent on safety initiatives
2016	9,372	10,497	€1.3M
2017	8,877	9,947	€1.53M
2018	8,905	9,849	€1.6M
2019	9,270	10,301	€1.62M
2020 (to 13th May 2020)	2,024	2,264	€0.61M (YTD)

The Health and Safety Authority operates across a broad mandate in the areas of occupational health and safety, chemicals, accreditation, as well as market surveillance of products.

The Health and Safety Authority works to an Annual Programme of Work which is approved by the Board of the Authority. The majority of its planned Safety Initiatives in any given year focus primarily on the high risk sectors such as construction and farming.

Covid-19 Pandemic

625. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will review the current timeline envisaged by the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business for the reopening of shopping centres by phase three or four in circumstances in which it can be demonstrated that operational safety measures can be implemented; her views on correspondence (details supplied); and the reason some retail units can open ahead of those units based in custom built shopping centres under the roadmap. [6563/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website *gov.ie*.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 8 May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30 June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to flex the plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Covid-19 Tests

626. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if her attention has been drawn to the fact that certain employees in particular some Irish persons with jobs based abroad are required to have a Covid-19 test before returning to work; her plans to put a system in place to facilitate tests for such persons; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6591/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Public health requirements in respect of persons working abroad is a matter for the authorities of the country where the employee is working.

The Irish Government is asking passengers arriving from overseas to complete a Public Health Passenger Locator Form and to self-isolate for 14 days following arrival. It is noted that you do not need to self-isolate if you:

20 May 2020

- return to the Republic of Ireland from Northern Ireland
- are an essential supply chain worker - for example, a pilot, haulier, maritime staff member
- are briefly stopping over at an airport on your way to another country

Further information on the procedures to be followed on arrival in Ireland can be found on the following webpage:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e885b2-covid-19-coronavirus-travel-advice/>.

Guidance for Supply Chain Workers is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ed29dc-irelands-response-to-covid-19-transport-measures/>

Work is underway to introduce regulations which will place these arrangements on a statutory basis. The introduction of such regulations will include detailed provisions on exempt categories.

Policy and practise on Covid-19 testing is a matter for the Department of Health and the HSE.

Covid-19 Pandemic

627. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the status of dog grooming businesses; the position or phase they come under with regard to reopening in view of the fact that many dog groomers work alone in an isolated environment (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6599/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday May 18. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

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The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

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I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to flex the plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Covid-19 Pandemic

628. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when bookmakers will re-open in the context of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business and the resumption of full services; and if as a licensed business bookmakers will follow the same reopening timeline as bars. [6607/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5

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A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to flex the plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the

context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Workplace Safety

629. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if the concerns raised by an organisation (details supplied) will be addressed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6642/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I have received the correspondence referred to from the Hairdressing Council of Ireland. I can confirm that I will be responding to the Council to address their concerns in the coming days.

Since this crisis began, I have engaged with businesses and responded by putting in place a broad range of business supports. I have convened numerous meetings of the Enterprise and Retail forums, which I chair, and met other representatives of employers and employees and the response back has been very positive. I will continue to maintain that dialogue with stakeholders so that we can work towards getting people back to work safely.

The Government recognises that the COVID-19 emergency has had an unprecedented impact on our economy, as well as society. It is acknowledged that as the reopening of the economy begins, businesses will require significant additional supports on top of the existing measures such as income support schemes and enhanced liquidity supports. However, it is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

Manufacturing Sector

630. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if consideration has been given to State sponsored manufacturing of protective face masks; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6643/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department continues to engage with its enterprise agencies, other Departments, public health officials, other enterprise development agencies and bodies and companies to increase the supply of a whole range of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

To date the following actions have been undertaken:

- Enterprise Ireland has connected both client and non-client Irish companies with capability to produce hand sanitizer and other types of PPE, including face masks, with the HSE.

- Enterprise Ireland's Global Sourcing and Public Sector Procurement staff, in conjunction with IDA Ireland and industry contacts, are working to identify where companies have capability to produce hand sanitizer and other types of PPE or which could source them through their networks. Company lists are being produced and shared with the HSE, where appropriate.

- Ireland has world-class researchers in our Higher Education Institutions and a diverse range of innovative companies, both indigenous and multinational, that can quickly pivot to deliver projects, treatments and interventions as needed. Research teams within the Higher Education Institutes, including Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) Research Centres and other SFI supported research teams, have joined the effort to respond to local and national demand

for PPE by producing face shields and other equipment for frontline staff. This work is being carried out on an ongoing basis.

As part of this work, a number of injection moulding companies have been approached with regard to face shield manufacture. Two Irish companies are producing face shields for the HSE and a number of Irish companies are now setting up production for masks to add to those already manufactured in Ireland or being sourced from overseas.

Other results emerging from this work are:

- A number of companies were identified as having potential capability and capacity to switch production to hand sanitizers. Irish companies are now meeting all HSE Hand Sanitizer requirements.

- A number of Irish companies are now making gowns and aprons for HSE.

- Assistance has been given to all manufacturers in sourcing the raw materials and packaging for the production of hand sanitizer and PPE.

- Some distilleries have made available ethanol for hand sanitizer production for free and at low cost.

- EI and IDA Clients and other companies have activated their supply network in China with a focus on face masks and gowns. Gloves have been sourced by two EI clients and from an agent based here.

- Another EI client has manufactured reagent for testing and supplied it to the HSE.

- Many Irish companies have been introduced to the HSE with COVID-19 related solutions in patient monitoring, disinfecting devices, testing and temperature detection and many other areas.

I can assure the Deputy that the Government will continue to work with all enterprises to ensure the supply of PPE to our front line workers.

Credit Guarantee Scheme

631. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the differences between the existing credit guarantee scheme and the new €2 billion credit guarantee scheme announced on 2 May 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6673/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government on 2 May announced a new €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme as a further development of the existing Credit Guarantee Scheme (CGS) already available from AIB, BOI and Ulster Bank.

This Scheme forms a major component of the government's strategy to aid SMEs in these difficult times by providing critical support to ensure businesses are facilitated in having access to credit facilities to assist a return to a more regular trading environment. It will provide an 80% guarantee on lending to SMEs until the end of this year, for terms between 3 months and 6 years. The guarantee can be used for a wide range of lending products between €10,000 and €1 million that have a maximum term of 6 years or less.

The implementation of this Scheme will require primary legislation, the drafting of which has been approved by Government, and my officials are already working with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel on this drafting work.

There are a number of liquidity supports for COVID 19 impacted businesses currently available, including the existing Credit Guarantee Scheme supporting loans up to €1 million for periods of up to 7 years. The scheme is designed to support a range of debt products appropriate to the borrowing needs of SMEs. Term loans and other products such as stocking facilities, performance bonds are covered by the Scheme. It is possible for SMEs to avail of between a three to six-month interest-only payment period subject to the lender's assessment of the application.

The differences between the existing Credit Guarantee Scheme (CGS) and the new Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme include:

- An increase in the level of guarantee available to participating finance providers from €150 million per annum to €2 billion and an increase in the portfolio cap which will provide these finance providers with greater security to offer facilities under the guarantee.

- The Covid-19 CGS will be available to primary producers which are excluded from the existing Scheme due to State Aid rules. This restriction has been removed in light of the Covid-19 situation and in accordance with the European Commission's State Aid Temporary Framework.

- The Covid-19 CGS will be available to small Mid-Caps (up to 499 employees) which are excluded from the current CGS.

- The Scheme will have interest rates below current market rates. The exact figures cannot be announced until the legislation and operational aspects have moved further along the process.

My officials are also currently engaged in discussions with a view to broadening the number of participating finance providers participating in the Scheme.

I can assure the Deputy that I continue to work with my colleagues across Government to examine supports to assist businesses impacted by Covid-19.

Credit Guarantee Scheme

632. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the date the current credit guarantee scheme came into effect; the allocation of State funding set aside for the existing credit guarantee scheme as against the scheme announced on 2 May 2020; the amount that has been currently used up; the number of loans that have been issued to companies under the scheme each month since the scheme was established; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6674/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Credit Guarantee Scheme was implemented under the Credit Guarantee Act 2012, which came into effect on 30 August 2012, with secondary legislation setting out the operational detail of the Scheme. The Credit Guarantee Scheme is available to Covid-19 impacted businesses, it supports loans up to €1 million for periods of up to 7 years. The Scheme offers a partial Government guarantee of 80% to banks against losses on qualifying loans to eligible SMEs. The scheme is designed to support a range of debt products appropriate to the borrowing needs of SMEs. Term loans and other products such as stocking facilities, performance bonds are covered by the Scheme.

An application to access the Credit Guarantee Scheme can be made through one of the participating finance providers which are currently Allied Irish Banks, Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank Ireland. The Scheme is operated by SBCI. The Department plays no role in the application or decision-making process, which, is fully delegated to the participating lenders. The current Credit Guarantee Scheme facilitates guarantees up to a maximum of €150 million in any one year.

There are no upfront costs for the scheme, however loans under guarantee represent a contingent liability for the State. Since its inception there have been eight claims against the Credit Guarantee Scheme for a value of €955,247.

Since its inception in 2012 there have been 863 loans sanctioned to the value of €151,659,224 up to 31st March 2020. While the monthly breakdown is not available I have provided the annual breakdown as follows.

Year	No. of Loans Sanctioned	Value
2012	6	€582,000
2013	88	€12,107,500
2014	68	€9,283,444
2015	108	€20,385,050
2016	131	€22,312,000
2017	129	€19,726,700
2018	139	€21,561,562
2019	118	€25,067,734
2020 Qtr 1	76	€20,633,234

As announced on Saturday, 2 May 2, Government has agreed a new €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme as a further development of the existing Credit Guarantee Scheme already available from AIB, BOI and Ulster Bank. This Scheme forms a major component of the government's strategy to aid SMEs in these difficult times by providing critical support to ensure businesses are facilitated in having access to credit facilities to assist a return to a more regular trading environment. It will provide an 80% guarantee on lending to SMEs until the end of this year, for terms between 3 months and 6 years. The guarantee will be able to be used for a wide range of lending products between €10,000 and €1 million that have a maximum term of 6 years or less.

The Scheme will be available to all SME sectors, including primary producers. It will also have interest rates below current market rates. The implementation of this Scheme will require primary legislation, the drafting of which has been approved by Government, and my officials are already working with the Office of the Parliamentary counsel on this drafting work.

Credit Guarantee Scheme

633. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the reason for the exclusions to the current credit guarantee scheme; if the agriculture sector primary production in agriculture, horticulture and fisheries is excluded from the scheme; if the construction sector property-related activities are excluded from the scheme; if a company cannot use the scheme to restructure its current debt; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6675/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The

Credit Guarantee Scheme was implemented in 2012 and is available to Covid-19 impacted businesses, it supports loans up to €1 million for periods of up to 7 years. The Scheme offers a partial Government guarantee of 80% to banks against losses on qualifying loans to eligible SMEs. The scheme is designed to support a range of debt products appropriate to the borrowing needs of SMEs. Term loans and other products such as stocking facilities, performance bonds are covered by the Scheme.

An application to access the Credit Guarantee Scheme can be made through one of the participating finance providers which are currently Allied Irish Banks, Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank Ireland. The Scheme is operated by SBCI, the Department plays no role in the application or decision-making process, which, is fully delegated to the participating lenders. The Credit Guarantee Scheme facilitates guarantees up to a maximum of €150 million in any one year.

Primary producers in agriculture, horticulture and fisheries are excluded from the current Credit Guarantee Scheme under State aid rules. However, they will be included under the Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme arising from the amended State Aid rules under the the European Commission's State Aid Temporary Framework measures to support the economy in the context of the Covid-19 outbreak.

The new Scheme will be available to all SME sectors, and will also be available to small Mid-Caps (under 499 employees) which are excluded from the current Scheme.

Refinancing of existing debts are excluded from the current Credit Guarantee Scheme as the purpose of this Scheme is to facilitate additional lending into the economy. Such arrangements continue to be dealt with by banks under their current lending arrangements. The new Scheme will include re-financing arrangements, the terms of these arrangement are currently under discussion with the financial institutions.

The implementation of the Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme will require primary legislation, the drafting of which has been approved by Government, and my officials are already working with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel on this drafting work.

Credit Guarantee Scheme

634. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if the exclusions in the current credit guarantee scheme will be removed from the new scheme announced on 2 May 2020; if the new scheme will avail of the relaxed state aid rules; if state aid approval has been sought for the new scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6676/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Since the Covid-19 crisis began, Government has worked to put in place a suite of supports to ensure appropriate financing is available to businesses that have been impacted by the outbreak or by the restrictions that have been put in place to mitigate the spread of the disease.

As announced on Saturday, May 2, Government has agreed a new €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme as a further development of the existing Credit Guarantee Scheme already available from AIB, BOI and Ulster Bank. This Scheme forms a major component of the Government's strategy to aid SMEs in these difficult times by providing critical support to ensure businesses are facilitated in having access to credit facilities to assist a return to a more regular trading environment. It will provide an 80% guarantee on lending to SMEs until the end of this year, for terms between 3 months and 6 years. The guarantee will be able to be used for a wide range of lending products between €10,000 and €1 million that have a maximum term

of 6 years or less.

The Scheme will be available to all SME sectors, including primary producers in agriculture, horticulture and fisheries. These sectors are excluded from the current Credit Guarantee Scheme under State aid rules. They will be included under the Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme arising from the amended State Aid rules under the the European Commission's State Aid Temporary Framework. The Scheme will also be available to small Mid-Caps (up to 499 employees) which are also excluded from the current Scheme.

The new Scheme will include re-financing arrangements, the terms of these arrangement are currently under discussion with the financial institutions.

My officials are currently engaged with the European Commission in seeking approval for the Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme and ensuring the Scheme's adherence to the rules set out in their Temporary Framework.

The implementation of this Scheme will require primary legislation, the drafting of which has been approved by Government, and my officials are already working with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel on this drafting work.

Covid-19 Pandemic

635. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when betting shops can re-open in view of the fact there is no guideline in the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business relating to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6684/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday 18 May 18. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

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I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

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Job Losses

636. Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if her attention has been drawn to the 176 redundancies announced by a company in Dundalk, County Louth, on 8 May 2020; if her attention has been further drawn to the fact that many of the redundant positions are being advertised in Tunisia; the engagement her Department has had with the company ahead of and after the redundancies announcement; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6694/20]

639. Deputy Fergus O'Dowd asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will make all available resources available to staff affected by job losses announced by a company (details supplied) in County Louth; if discussions have taken place to offer the wage subsidy scheme to the company in the short term; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6812/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 636 and 639 together.

The announcement by National Pen that it is to seek redundancies at its Dundalk facility is deeply disappointing. My immediate concern is for the workers and families who have been impacted by this announcement. Many of these workers have been with the company for many years, which makes this news all the more difficult.

The IDA have been in contact with senior management at National Pen and will continue to work closely with the company to support and maintain the Dundalk operation. The company has stated that it has experienced a significant decline in demand for its products. It has advised the IDA that the steps being taken now are necessary to secure the long-term future of the business and preserve the positions of the majority of the workers at the Dundalk operation.

It is important to remember that, despite the loss of these roles, National Pen will continue to be a significant employer in the region. The company has confirmed that it remains committed to operating in Ireland and will retain 380 staff in Dundalk.

The Government will make every State support available to employees impacted by this announcement. My Department, the Department of Social Protection, as well as our State Agencies, will all be doing their utmost to help workers transition and find new employment opportunities.

IDA Ireland has already made the company aware of the Government supports that are available. I understand that the IDA will also be working with National Pen's HR team to connect staff with other clients in the IDA portfolio in due course.

Ireland's economy, as we all know, is outward-facing, export-orientated and reliant to a large degree on global FDI. This means that when a multinational company makes decisions, either as result of Covid-19 or for other business reasons, we unfortunately can feel the impact here.

However, the employment situation in Louth has been positive in recent years with over 4,400 staff employed in IDA firms in Louth, a more than threefold increase on 2010. The pipeline of new jobs has included significant investments from Wuxi Biologic, Panasonic, Wuxi Vaccines and PCI Pharma.

Covid-19 Pandemic

637. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her views on whether boutique gyms, micro gyms and those that offer personal training and small group personal training would be more suited to inclusion in phase 3 of the Covid-19 re-opening phases which allows for indoor sporting activities in which social distancing is adhered to behind closed doors rather than in phase 5 (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6801/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5

of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday 18 May. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 8 May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30 June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

The Roadmap document is a living document and will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were

consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to amend its plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Proposed Legislation

638. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if legislation prepared by her Department will be required to implement the new measures announced recently to help businesses recover from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic; the progress made to date in drafting this legislation; when it is hoped to publish same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6806/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Heather Humphreys T.D.

I recognise that the current healthcare crisis has put enormous pressure on companies of all sizes and across all sectors in our economy, and the Government has put in place a number of schemes to support enterprises and their employees in responding to the crisis.

To further enhance the supports already available to enterprise, the Minister for Finance, Paschal Donohoe TD, and I announced a suite of measures to support businesses that are negatively impacted by Covid-19 which had been agreed by Government at its meeting on Saturday 2 May 2020.

Within that package, the specific measure which falls within the remit of my Department is the €2 billion Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme.

The implementation of this new Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme requires amendments to the Credit Guarantee Act 2012 (as amended). Since the Government approved the scheme, officials in my Department have been working urgently alongside the Office of Parliamentary Counsel on the priority drafting of the Covid 19 Miscellaneous Financing Provisions Bill 2020.

This amending legislation will also include amendments to the Microenterprise Loan Fund Act 2012 to facilitate Microfinance Ireland (MFI) to be able to borrow moneys from bodies other than its parent body, the Social Finance Foundation. This is intended to allow MFI to have access to greater sources of funding, to enhance its ability to provide more microenterprise loans to those qualifying enterprises in need of additional finance options.

There is also an amendment to the European Investment Fund Act 2018 to be included within this Bill, which will allow it to take greater advantage of additional funding streams available from the European Investment Bank and European Investment Fund to facilitate access to finance for qualifying enterprises. These measures are also intended to facilitate increasing the range and capacity of sources of additional finance for enterprises in Ireland, allowing them to identify what best suits their own individual needs.

My Department and the Office of Parliamentary Counsel intend to publish the Bill before the end of May. My priority is to ensure that this legislation can be progressed through the Oireachtas as a matter of urgency following the formation of a new Government. I am very aware of the pressure for enterprise to access these supports in order to be able to resume economic activity and hope that all Parliamentarians will facilitate its urgent commencement.

In order to support that urgency, and in tandem with the preparation of the enabling legislation, officials in my Department, along with officials from the Department of Finance and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, have also been working on progressing the operational issues to establish the Covid 19 Credit Guarantee Scheme as quickly as possible, including negotiating with the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland and participating financial institutions.

I would also like to remind Deputies that the existing array of supports for business from the Department, its enterprise agencies and other Departments, continue to be available for businesses at this time.

Question No. 639 answered with Question No. 636.

Credit Guarantee Scheme

640. Deputy Michael McGrath asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the average interest rate charged by the banks on the loans handed out with regard the current credit guarantee scheme; if there is a 0.5% premium on top of that for the guarantee scheme; if she is considering to reduce this premium to zero; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6814/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Credit Guarantee Scheme was implemented in 2012 and is available to Covid-19 impacted businesses, it supports loans up to €1 million for periods of up to 7 years. The Scheme offers a partial Government guarantee of 80% to banks against losses on qualifying loans to eligible SMEs. The scheme is designed to support a range of debt products appropriate to the borrowing needs of SMEs. Term loans and other products such as stocking facilities, performance bonds are covered by the Scheme.

The interest rate charged on a loan is the SME lending rate of the individual bank offering the loan which can change according to market conditions. It is possible for SMEs to avail of between a three to six-month interest-only payment period subject to the lender's assessment of the application.

In addition, the borrower pays a premium which partially covers the cost of providing the guarantee. The premium can vary but is currently 0.5%. State Aid rules for Government guarantees require that a premium be charged. The European Commission's State Aid Temporary Framework, also sets guarantee premium requirements but makes no provision for a zero-value premium.

An application to access the Credit Guarantee Scheme can be made through one of the participating finance providers which are currently Allied Irish Banks, Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank Ireland. The Scheme is operated by SBCI, the Department plays no role in the application or decision-making process, which, is fully delegated to the participating lenders. The Credit Guarantee Scheme facilitates guarantees up to a maximum of €150 million in any one year.

As announced on Saturday 2 May, Government has agreed a new €2 billion Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme as a further development of the existing Credit Guarantee Scheme already available from AIB, BOI and Ulster Bank. This Scheme forms a major component of the Government's strategy to aid SMEs in these difficult times by providing critical support to ensure businesses are facilitated in having access to credit facilities to assist a return to a more regular trading environment. It will provide an 80% guarantee on lending to SMEs until the end of this year, for terms between 3 months and 6 years. The guarantee will be able to be used for a

wide range of lending products between €10,000 and €1 million that have a maximum term of 6 years or less.

The Scheme will be available to all SME sectors, including primary producers. The implementation of this Scheme will require primary legislation, the drafting of which has been approved by Government, and my officials are already working with the Office of the Parliamentary counsel on this drafting work.

Credit Guarantee Scheme

641. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the interest rate that will be applicable to loans advanced under the new scheme for the €2 billion credit guarantee scheme announced in early May 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6815/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As announced on Saturday 2 May, Government has agreed a new €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme as a further development of the existing Credit Guarantee Scheme already available from AIB, BOI and Ulster Bank. This Scheme forms a major component of the Government's strategy to aid SMEs in these difficult times by providing critical support to ensure businesses are facilitated in having access to credit facilities to assist a return to a more regular trading environment. It will provide an 80% guarantee on lending to SMEs until the end of this year, for terms between 3 months and 6 years. The guarantee will be able to be used for a wide range of lending products between €10,000 and €1 million that have a maximum term of 6 years or less.

The Scheme will be available to all SME sectors, including primary producers. It will also have interest rates below current market rates. The implementation of this Scheme will require primary legislation, the drafting of which has been approved by Government, and my officials are already working with the Office of the Parliamentary counsel on this drafting work.

Credit Guarantee Scheme

642. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the changes made to the credit guarantee scheme as a result of Covid-19; the number of loans that have been advanced under the scheme since the changes were made; the value of loans advanced under the scheme since the changes were made; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6816/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government announced a new €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme, as a further development of the existing Credit Guarantee Scheme already available from AIB, BOI and Ulster Bank, on the 2nd May.

This Scheme forms a major component of the Government's strategy to aid SMEs in these difficult times by providing critical support to ensure businesses are facilitated in having access to credit facilities to assist a return to a more regular trading environment. It will provide an 80% guarantee on lending to SMEs until the end of this year, for terms between 3 months and 6 years. The guarantee will be able to be used for a wide range of lending products between €10,000 and €1 million that have a maximum term of 6 years or less.

The Scheme will be available to all SME sectors, including primary producers. It will also have interest rates below current market rates. The implementation of this Scheme will require primary legislation, the drafting of which has been approved by Government, and my officials are already working with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel on this drafting work and as it awaiting legislation, loans are not yet being advanced under the revised scheme.

There are a number of liquidity supports for COVID 19 impacted businesses available right now, including the existing Credit Guarantee Scheme supporting loans up to €1 million for periods of up to 7 years. The Scheme is designed to support a range of debt products appropriate to the borrowing needs of SMEs. Term loans and other products such as stocking facilities, performance bonds are covered by the Scheme. It is possible for SMEs to avail of between a three to six-month interest-only payment period subject to the lender's assessment of the application.

An application to access the current Credit Guarantee Scheme can be made through one of the participating finance providers which are currently Allied Irish Bank, Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank Ireland. The Scheme is operated by SBCI, the Department plays no role in the application or decision-making process, which, is fully delegated to the participating lenders. The Credit Guarantee Scheme facilitates guarantees up to a maximum of €150 million in any one year.

When the COVID-19 crisis began, I made changes to the Credit Guarantee Scheme to make it easier for businesses to access – including removing the requirement that businesses be refused a loan by the banks before they could access the scheme.

I can assure the Deputy that I continue to work with my colleagues across Government to examine supports to assist businesses impacted by Covid-19.

Covid-19 Pandemic

643. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if guidance will be provided to those doing one on one consultations, such as personal trainers, on when they will be permitted to resume these sessions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6849/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking the restrictions put in place to contain the Coronavirus, at three week intervals. The Roadmap sets out how we can keep the level of transmission of COVID-19 as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions in proportion with the positive social and economic benefits which will be brought about by businesses reopening. It is important to note that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions as envisaged in Phases 2 to 5 of the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May the Government announced that we would move to move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap from Monday 18 May. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of retailers and other facilities that can re-open under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

Businesses should review the Roadmap carefully and carry out a detailed assessment of their activities with regard to the continuing public health measures. Businesses should, based on their assessment, identify which category in which phase of reopening they will be in a position to reopen safely and in line with the continued public health measures. It is not necessary for businesses to seek official authorisation to reopen.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol is a useful guide for businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. It sets out in very clear terms for employers and workers the steps that they must take firstly before a workplace reopens, and then while it continues to operate.

The Protocol is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>

The Health and Safety Authority, which is an agency of my Department, is the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the Protocol in the workplace. If employers or employees need further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 8 May the Government agreed details of a further support which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant will be available to businesses with a turnover of less than €5m and employing 50 people or less, which were closed or impacted by at least a 25% reduction in turnover out to 30 June 2020. It is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, I know that employers and employees want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition, but it must be safe to do so. My Department contributed to the considerations around the phased re-opening of sectors and I will work within Government to secure further details and clarity for businesses as we progress through the phases outlined in the Roadmap.

A wide range of stakeholders including employers, unions and representative groups were consulted and their advice formed part of the considerations when drawing up the Roadmap. It is a living document and Government has the ability to flex the plans depending on the circumstances existing as we progress through each phase. It will be subject to regular review in the context of the progression or suppression of the disease in Ireland or new guidance or research that emerges from other sources.

Workplace Safety

644. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the State agency responsible for enforcing public health guidelines in the workplace as set out in the Return to Work Safely Protocol; if spot workplace inspections will take place under the protocol; and the number of inspectors available under the protocol. [6851/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The national “Return to Work Safely Protocol” provides a clear compliance framework for all plac-

es of work to ensure that businesses can re-open and workers can return to work safely. The Protocol was drafted in close consultation with the social partners under the auspices of the Labour and Employer Economic Forum and agreed with them.

Compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol is being led by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), who have overall responsibility for ensuring the health, safety and welfare at work of all workers

The HSA is deploying all its available inspectors across sectors to carry out both spot checks and other inspections to check compliance with the Protocol. The HSA inspectorate will be supplemented significantly by deploying, under the authority of the HSA, other inspectors from across the system who already have an environmental health, agriculture or other workplace/business inspection responsibilities. As we have seen with the general public health measures over the past two months, most people are complying with the rules. We can expect the same from employers and workers, most of who want to get back to work, and want the workplace to be safe, for them and for the families that they are returning to in the evenings.

Even with the enhanced cohort of inspectors available to the HSA, they cannot be expected to go into every business in the country. That would be entirely unrealistic and unachievable. What they will do is a mix of unannounced inspections, along with providing advice and information through the HSAs Workplace Contact Unit email and phonenumber wcu@hsa.ie and Tel: 1890 289 389.

If, following contact from a worker, and follow-up engagement with the employer, they feel that an inspection is warranted, they will follow up with an on-site visit. If, on foot of an inspection, the inspector forms the opinion that further action is required, the appropriate action - up to and including the closure of a workplace - will be taken using the relevant powers. Where relevant, the public health authorities will be involved, and we have already seen this in the case of the meat processing plants.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

645. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the supports available for businesses that need to make structural changes to their business premises to adhere to Covid-19 guidelines; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6866/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): A major part of my Department's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been to expand the range of financial supports to ensure businesses have sufficient liquidity to see them through the crisis and to prepare for the announced reopening phases. My Department and I continue to monitor the needs of companies as the situation evolves and provide new supports where required and appropriate to do so.

Included in the now €7.5 billion of liquidity supports which I announced over the past few weeks, is a Sustaining Enterprise Fund for Small Enterprises which is being administered by Enterprise Ireland. This fund for smaller businesses provides €25,000 and €50,000 in repayable advances, depending on size and turnover of company. This fund will provide liquidity to enable these enterprises to steer a pathway towards recovery and to introduce measures in response to the controls and health and safety requirements in line with changing work patterns and protocols and guidelines being introduced as we begin the re-opening of the economy.

On 15 May last, the Government also agreed the arrangements for the new €250m "Restart

Grant” for micro enterprises and small businesses. The “Restart Grant” is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. It will be a critically important tool to support small businesses to reopen their doors and get back on their feet. This grant will enable small and micro business reconnect with their employees and customer base by helping to defray ongoing fixed costs and the costs, such as PPE, associated with re-launching the business.

The grants will be equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000. Applications for the “Restart Grant” can be made online to all local authorities from Friday 22 May.

In addition to the extensive package of liquidity measures announced, the full range of Enterprise Ireland, IDA, Local Enterprise Office (LEO) and Údarás na Gaeltachta grant and advisory supports continue to be available to eligible firms to help with strategies to access finance, commence or ramp-up online trading activity, reconfigure business models, cut costs, innovate, diversify markets and supply chains and to improve competitiveness.

I can assure the Deputy that I continue to work with my colleagues across Government and all stakeholders to examine further appropriate supports to assist businesses impacted by Covid-19. In that regard, Government will continue to explore funding potential for all enterprises as they work through the challenges facing them, including through any mechanisms allowable under the EU’s state aid framework.

Work Permits

646. **Deputy Louise O’Reilly** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of permits for migrant workers issued to date for each of the months to May 2020; the figures for the same period for 2019; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6928/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Under the Employment Permits Acts in order to work in the State all non-EEA nationals require a valid employment permit or relevant immigration permission from the Minister for Justice and Equality which allows them to reside and work in the State without the requirement for an employment permit. Migrant workers from the European Union and European Economic Area (EEA) do not require an employment permit to work in Ireland.

Ireland operates a managed employment permits system maximising the benefits of economic migration and minimising the risk of disrupting Ireland’s labour market. The employment permits regime is designed to facilitate the entry of appropriately skilled non-EEA nationals to fill skills and/or labour shortages, however, this objective must be balanced by the need to ensure that there are no suitably qualified Irish/EEA nationals available to undertake the work and that the shortage is a genuine one.

In order to ensure that the employment permits system is responsive to changes in economic circumstances and labour market conditions, it is managed through the operation of the Critical Skills and Ineligible Occupations Lists for the purpose of granting an employment permit, which are subject to twice yearly review. These reviews, which are evidence based and are guided by research undertaken by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) and the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) in SOLAS, as well as a public consultation process and input from the relevant Government Departments as well as the Economic Migration Inter-Departmental Group, chaired by the Department. Account is also taken of contextual

factors such as Brexit and, in the current context, COVID-19.

At the end of April 2020 there was a 6% increase in the number of applications received over the same period in 2019, and there was a 15% increase in the number of permits issued over the same period in 2019. Since the COVID-19 crisis began, the Department has been prioritising the processing of employment permit applications for medical personnel and these applications continue to be prioritised. Since mid-March, this has resulted in 1,404 employment permits issuing to medical personnel, accounting for approx. 37% of permits issued in that period.

The statistics request by the Deputy are as follows:

	Permits Issued	Permits Issued
	2019	2020
Jan	1,556	1,349
Feb	1,196	1,447
March	1,155	1,228
April	1,112	1,769
May	1,359	831 (at COB 15th May)

The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation has implemented a contingency plan to ensure that the Employment Permit system continues to operate throughout the crisis. The Department has implemented remote working arrangements for staff and has adjusted operations to, inter alia, provide for the acceptance of electronic/scanned documents.

Full details on the Employment Permits contingency arrangements are available at the following link - <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/COVID-19-Employment-Permits-System-Contingency-Arrangements.pdf>

Ministerial Meetings

647. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she has engaged with a group (details supplied); if so, the time and date of these meetings; if she will publish the minutes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6936/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I have engaged with representatives of the Industry concerned. I have had two conference calls to date, the first on 7 May 2020 and the second today, 20 May 2020, with the Industry. The President of the Group concerned was one of the participants in the call this morning.

Health and Safety Authority

648. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the additional resources deployed to the Health and Safety Authority to ensure it can monitor compliance with Covid-19 recommendations; the grade of the additional workers; the hours of work specifically spent on inspections of the additional workers; the number of hours they are contracted for in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6937/20]

649. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if consideration has been given to the need for a dedicated hotline for workers who have specific Covid-19 related concerns regarding their health and safety on returning to and continuing to

work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6938/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 648 and 649 together.

The national “Return to Work Safely Protocol” provides a clear compliance framework for all places of work to ensure that businesses can re-open and workers can return to work safely. The Protocol was drafted in close consultation with the social partners under the auspices of the Labour and Employer Economic Forum and agreed with them.

Compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol is being led by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), who have overall responsibility for ensuring the health, safety and welfare at work of all workers. While the HSA has an overall complement of about 100 in the inspectorate grade, between 60 and 70 of these will initially be deployed across sectors to carry out both spot checks and other inspections to check compliance with the Protocol. The HSA inspectorate will be supplemented significantly by deploying, under the authority of the HSA, other inspectors from across the system who already have an environmental health, agriculture or other workplace/business inspection responsibilities. These will be warranted by me, using powers in the 2005 Act, to carry out COVID-19 inspections under the Protocol, as the economy opens up in line with the Government Roadmap.

As we have seen with the general public health measures over the past two months, most people are complying with the rules. We can expect the same from employers and workers, most of who want to get back to work, and want the workplace to be safe, for them and for the families that they are returning to in the evenings. So I am expecting employers and workers, in line with what is set out in the Protocol, to actively and jointly take responsibility for applying the clear measures set out in the Protocol, for the health and safety of all concerned.

The HSA is deploying all its available inspectors across sectors to carry out both spot checks and other inspections to check compliance with the Protocol. The HSA inspectorate will be supplemented significantly by deploying, under the authority of the HSA, other inspectors from across the system who already have an environmental health, agriculture or other workplace/business inspection responsibilities. As we have seen with the general public health measures over the past two months, most people are complying with the rules. We can expect the same from employers and workers, most of who want to get back to work, and want the workplace to be safe, for them and for the families that they are returning to in the evenings.

Even with the enhanced cohort of inspectors available to the HSA, they cannot be expected to go into every business in the country. That would be entirely unrealistic and unachievable. What they will do is a mix of unannounced inspections, along with providing advice and information through the HSAs Workplace Contact Unit email and phonenumber.

The inspectors will be a mix of grades, but all are warranted to carry out inspections under the 2005 Act. The number of hours to be worked by each individual inspector is not possible to compile.

In relation to a dedicated hotline for workers the Health and Safety Authority’s workplace contact unit (WCU) is available to answer any queries employers, workers or members of the public may have in regard to all occupational safety and health matters including adherence with the provisions of the National Return to Work Protocol. Additional resources have been made available for the WCU. Workplace contract unit email and phone number wcu@hsa.ie and Tel: 1890 289 389.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

650. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if supports will be provided for businesses having difficulties paying rent and facing rent arrears due to Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6961/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The issues businesses are facing in respect of commercial rents / leases have been raised with me through the Enterprise Forum and Retail Forum, both of which I chair, and other channels.

These are difficult times and many companies have had to temporarily close their businesses and/or premise(s), curtail their activities or make alternative work arrangements due to COVID-19 restrictions. I am keenly aware that some businesses are concerned that some landlords are continuing to insist on the payment of rents and leases as normal despite their premises being closed.

At the same time, we must remember that landlords have their own financial obligations, like debt repayments, insurance or security costs, that still need to be paid. Where a landlord has debt in place, their flexibility will likely be driven by what their bank / lender will accept. The Minister for Finance raised the broader issue of rents in meetings with the pillar banks. He referenced this in his announcement of 18 March concerning an arrangement with the banks to the effect that any landlord who has agreed a deal with the banks on foot of the arrangement will be expected to pass the benefit on to their tenants. I reiterated this in the Dáil on 30 April last.

While commercial leases are primarily a contractual matter for the tenant and the landlord, the Government has urged landlords to demonstrate forbearance in these extraordinary times and to play their part, as everyone must, in helping the country through this difficult period. I would encourage tenants and landlords to engage with each other on this matter and come to some arrangement as it is in everybody's interest that terms are amicably agreed.

I have asked my officials to raise the matter of commercial rents and leases across a number of Government Departments. An initial inter-departmental discussion has already taken place and I understand further engagement is underway with a range of stakeholders, including groups representing businesses and landlords, to gain additional insights and gather intelligence to inform any further discussions. I have also asked my officials to look into the different responses from other countries and to identify possible options for supports.

While different options are being explored, I would point out that any support to business in respect of rents alone would ultimately end up as a support to the landlord. Not only would it be difficult to estimate the costs involved for such a scheme, but the offering of support, or even the perception that such supports will be forthcoming, may affect the market and lessen the impetus for landlords to renegotiate with tenants.

The matter of legal protections for businesses who are unable to pay their commercial rents has been raised with the Attorney General. Specifically, I asked about the potential for legislation to prevent the eviction of commercial tenants who have failed to pay rent as a result of the pandemic and the possibility of legislating to place a moratorium on businesses having to pay rent for premises they cannot use due to the restrictions imposed by Government. I have just received a response in which the Attorney General advises that there are significant legal difficulties in respect to both of the questions posed. I have asked my officials to consider this advice.

The Government is committed to ensuring as many businesses as possible survive this challenging period, and it will continue to look at how we can support businesses that have been

impacted by the COVID-19 crisis.

I would like to point out that the Government has introduced a range of measures aimed at supporting businesses including:

- The Credit Guarantee Scheme supports loans up to €1 million for periods of up to 7 years. Applications can be made to AIB, Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank. Eligibility criteria apply.

- Microenterprises can access COVID-19 Business Loans of up to €50,000 from Microfinance Ireland. The terms include a six months interest free and repayment free moratorium, with the loan to then be repaid over the remaining 30 months of the 36-month loan period. Businesses can apply through their Local Enterprise Office or directly online at www.microfinanceireland.ie.

- The new €450m SBCI COVID-19 Working Capital Scheme for eligible businesses supports loans from €25,000 up to €1.5 million (first €500,000 unsecured). Applications can be made through the SBCI website at www.sbc.gov.ie.

- An additional €200 million in COVID-19 funding for the Future Growth Loan Scheme, which will be released in tranches, will provide longer-term loans to COVID-19 impacted businesses.

- The new Sustaining Enterprise Fund of up to €180 million is specifically aimed at firms with 10 or more employees impacted by COVID-19 that are vulnerable but viable. The fund is operated by Enterprise Ireland, providing repayable advances of up to €800,000 as agreed with the EU under new State Aid rules.

On 2 May, a number of additional measures to aid the economy as the Covid-19 restrictions start to be lifted were introduced. These included:

- A €10,000 restart grant for micro and small businesses based on a rates waiver/rebate from 2019 (see below for more information);

- A three-month commercial rates waiver for impacted businesses;

- A €2 billion Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund within the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF), which will make capital available to medium and large enterprises on commercial terms;

- A €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme to support lending to SMEs for terms ranging from 3 months to 6 years, which will be below market interest rates;

- The ‘warehousing’ of tax liabilities for a period of twelve months after recommencement of trading during which time there will be no debt enforcement action taken by Revenue and no interest charge accruing in respect of the warehoused debt;

- A commitment to local authorities to make up the rates shortfall, so that local authorities can continue provide full services to the public.

These supports acknowledge that impacted businesses need time and space to restructure and resume activity, without the added pressures of trying to repay legacy debts, such as commercial rents, when revenues are just beginning to return.

On Friday 15th May last, the Government agreed the arrangements for the new €250m “Restart Grant” for micro enterprises and small businesses. The Restart Grant is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with em-

ployees and customers. Eligible businesses will receive a Restart Grant equivalent to their commercial rates assessment for 2019 (excluding arrears), subject to a minimum grant of €2,000 and a maximum of €10,000.

This grant will provide funding to enable small and micro business reconnect with their employees and customer base by helping to defray ongoing fixed costs and the costs, such as PPE, associated with re-launching the business.

Further information on all of these and additional Government supports for COVID-19 impacted businesses can be found at www.gov.ie or on my Department's website (<https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>).

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

651. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to provide supports for the live entertainment industry (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7021/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy is aware, policy responsibility for the arts rests with my colleague, the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Josepha Madigan TD. Information on the suite of COVID-19 supports for artists and this working in the arts sector which her Department has put in place is available at www.chg.gov.ie.

I am acutely aware of the immediate and critical financial pressures which the pandemic has created across all business sectors. Accordingly, I have put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward for weeks and months ahead. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

Health and Safety Authority

652. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the additional staffing and resources that will be made available to the HSA to ensure that it can carry out widespread inspections of workplaces to ensure compliance with public health measures and social distancing, provision of PPE and sanitiser and to ensure prompt responses to reported breaches of public health guidelines; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7022/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The national "Return to Work Safely Protocol" provides a clear compliance framework for all places of work to ensure that businesses can re-open and workers can return to work safely. The Protocol was drafted in close consultation with the social partners under the auspices of the Labour and Employer Economic Forum and agreed with them.

Compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol is being led by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), who have overall responsibility for ensuring the health, safety and welfare at work of all workers.

The HSA is deploying all its available inspectors across sectors to carry out both spot checks and other inspections to check compliance with the Protocol. The HSA inspectorate will be supplemented significantly by deploying, under the authority of the HSA, other inspectors from across the system who already have an environmental health, agriculture or other workplace/business inspection responsibilities. As we have seen with the general public health measures over the past two months, most people are complying with the rules. We can expect the same from employers and workers, most of who want to get back to work, and want the workplace to be safe, for them and for the families that they are returning to in the evenings.

I am expecting employers and workers, in line with what is set out in the Protocol, to actively and jointly take responsibility for applying the clear measures set out in the Protocol, for the health and safety of all concerned.

Even with the enhanced cohort of inspectors available to the HSA, they cannot be expected to go into every business in the country. That would be entirely unrealistic and unachievable. What they will do is a mix of unannounced inspections, along with providing advice and information through the HSAs Workplace Contact Unit email and phonenumber.

If, following contact from a worker, and follow-up engagement with the employer, they feel that an inspection is warranted, they will follow up with an on-site visit.

Importantly, if, on foot of an inspection, the inspector forms the opinion that further action is required, the appropriate action - up to and including the closure of a workplace - will be taken using the relevant powers. Where relevant, the public health authorities will be involved, and we have already seen this in the case of the meat processing plants.

I am satisfied that the steps that we have taken are giving both employers and employees the confidence to re-open businesses and return to work.

Departmental Contracts

653. Deputy Cian O’Callaghan asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the amount spent on external consultants by her Department in 2019; the average hourly rate; if caps or limits on such spending are in place; the way in which conflicts of interest are managed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7275/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department spent a total of €902,646 on external consultancy in 2019.

The Department considers hiring external consultants in cases where there is not the necessary expertise to deliver the project in-house, in cases where an external assessment is deemed essential, or in cases where a project must be completed within a short time scale, and although the expertise or experience may be available in-house, performing the task would involve a prohibitive opportunity cost.

An overall budget ceiling for consultancy expenditure is set at the beginning of the year. Projects to be prioritised for funding from this budget are initially reviewed by a Consultancy and Research Group, chaired by an Assistant Secretary, for recommendation to the Department’s Management Board, with final approval of consultancy and research projects by the Management Board

In each particular case, criteria specific to the project are used in selecting an outside agency or consultancy, including cost and value for money. Contracts are awarded based on the most

economically advantageous tender (specifying, in addition to price, various other criteria including running costs, servicing costs, level of after sales service, technical assistance, technical merit, environmental characteristics). Contracts are not generally awarded on the basis of average hourly rates.

My Department complies with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's guidelines for engagements of consultants by the civil service, having regard to public procurement guidelines.

Garda Vetting

654. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the provisions being considered to speed up the process of vetting special needs assistants for redeployment (details supplied). [5587/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): As the Deputy's question refers to a service issue, it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

State Claims Agency Data

655. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Health the number of claims submitted to the State Claims Agency relating to Covid-19; the number of expected claims; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5642/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The State Claims Agency (SCA) has a statutory remit to manage personal injury claims, including claims in respect of clinical negligence, on behalf of Delegated State Authorities (DSA's) including the Health Service Executive.

I have been informed by the SCA that it has not received any claims relating to COVID-19 to date and also that it is not possible to predict with any accuracy the number of claims that may be received in time.

Mental Health Services

656. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if emergency funding will be allocated to ensure the continuation of services at an organisation (details supplied) and other bodies in the area of mental health. [5726/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): In addition to the continuation of the existing HSE funding of €2.03m per year, the HSE and Pieta House have now formally agreed to additional funding of €114,608 per month, equivalent to €343,824 per quarter once the current Government staffing cost schemes, of which Pieta House is availing, have ceased.

The HSE has committed to provide cash flow support on a monthly basis, with the position to be reviewed after each quarter. The funding is being provided to fund an additional 300 hours of high-risk clients and the quarterly review will ensure that any client who commences a programme of support can have reasonable assurance of its completion. The cash flow support is also contingent on continuation of the process of engagement with the HSE to work towards creating a more sustainable funding model for the organisation.

This arrangement will provide necessary support to Pieta as it, and the HSE, continue to work together.

Direct Provision System

657. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health if statistics on the number of confirmed Covid-19 cases among direct provision residents include reception centres such as Baleskin; if not, if such centres can be included in statistics going forward; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5743/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Both my Department and the HSE are committed to protecting the identity and medical confidentiality of direct provision residents, as required by law, and therefore do not give specific information about individuals or locations. Information on cases or outbreaks of any illness (COVID-19 or otherwise) is provided only if there is a public health reason to do so.

Cannabis for Medicinal Use

658. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Health if the cultivation of a crop (details supplied) falls under the remit of his Department; if so, the plans developed to date relating to the industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6118/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): It is an offence to cultivate, import, export, produce, supply and possess cannabis except in accordance with a Ministerial licence.

The Misuse of Drugs (Designation) Order 2017, limits the purposes for which such licences for cannabis can be issued, for example for forensic analysis or research - including research involving the cultivation of cannabis for use in approved clinical trials.

Policy to date has not permitted the cultivation of cannabis for medical purposes and no licences have been issued for this activity. However it is envisaged that recent developments on access to cannabis for medical use may prompt a review of this position in the future.

The Department's priority at this time is the sourcing of suitable quality approved, affordable, finished cannabis products for medical purposes, i.e. those products that have been made in a GMP certified facility or equivalent internationally recognised quality standards. Cultivation of cannabis for medical purposes will not be addressed until this critical goal is achieved in the shorter term as all available resources are focussed on this work.

Further information regarding the licencing process of cannabis cultivation for research purposes may be obtained from the Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA).

Covid-19 Pandemic

659. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health the number of construction workers who tested positive for the virus or who have died from Covid-19 to date [6282/20]

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

Respite Care Services

660. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Health when it will be possible to offer a return of respite care for special needs children in the context of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business and the resumption of full services; and the plans and safeguards in place to protect special needs children (details supplied). [6606/20]

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

HSE Agency Staff

661. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health if a review has been carried out to compare the average hourly cost to the HSE in CHO1 of hours from the approved tender providers with the average hourly cost to the HSE of hours from the agencies which had been providing the service prior to the award in 2017 in advance of the renewal of the contract for healthcare assistant agency cover; if the tender process has been evaluated to investigate if there was a saving to the HSE on the average hourly cost of CHO1 hours; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6629/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

National Public Health Emergency Team

662. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the details of the members he approved for appointment to the National Public Health Emergency Team; if documentation on the way in which such persons were chosen will be provided; and the way in which he approved such appointments. [6645/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) for COVID-19 was established on 27 January 2020. It is chaired by the Chief Medical Officer. The NPHE oversees and provides national direction, guidance, support and expert advice on the development and implementation of a strategy to contain COVID-19 in Ireland. It is not a permanent structure, but rather is established in response to emerging public health emergencies.

The NPHE is a long-standing mechanism, which has been utilised over many years to provide a forum to steer strategic approaches to public health emergencies in Ireland and to mobilise the necessary health service responses. This is consistent with Ireland's obligations

under World Health Organisation International Health Regulations, where States are required to establish multidisciplinary /multisectoral teams to respond to events that may constitute a public health emergency of international concern.

The National Action Plan on COVID-19, published on 16 March, 2020 states that Ireland’s approach will be to “continue to deliver a public health-led evidence-based Government-wide response to COVID-19, including enabling the NPHEt to advise across Government, drive immediate actions, and steer contingency planning, as well as appropriate and proportionate decision-making”.

The composition of any particular NPHEt established will depend on the nature of the particular public health threat in question. There are currently 31 multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral members on the NPHEt. The members are:

Members	NPHEt
Dr Tony Holohan (Chair)	Chief Medical Officer, Department of Health (DOH)
Prof Colm Bergin	Consultant Infectious Diseases, St. James’s Hospital and Professor of Medicine, Trinity College Dublin
Mr Paul Bolger	Director, Resources Division, DOH
Dr Eibhlin Connolly	Deputy Chief Medical Officer, DOH
Ms Tracey Conroy	A/Sec, Acute Hospitals Division, DOH
Dr John Cuddihy	Interim Director, Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC)
Dr Cillian de Gascun	Director, National Virus Reference Laboratory (NVRL), UCD, Consultant Virologist
Mr Colm Desmond	A/Sec, Corporate Legislation, Mental Health, Drugs Policy and Food Safety Division, DOH
Dr Lorraine Doherty	National Clinical Director for Health Protection, HPSC, HSE
Dr Mary Favier	President, Irish College of General Practitioners (ICGP)
Dr Ronan Glynn	Deputy Chief Medical Officer, DOH
Mr Fergal Goodman	A/Sec, Primary Care Division, DOH
Dr Colm Henry	Chief Clinical Officer, HSE
Dr Kevin Kelleher	Asst. National Director, Public Health, HSE
Mr David Leach	Deputy National Director of Communications, HSE
Dr Kathleen Mac Lellan	A/Sec, Social Care Division, DOH
Dr Jeanette Mc Callion	Medical Assessor, Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA)
Mr Tom McGuinness	Asst. National Director, Office of Emergency Planning, HSE
Dr Siobhán Ní Bhrian	Lead for Integrated Care, HSE
Prof Philip Nolan	President, National University of Ireland, Maynooth
Ms Kate O’Flaherty	Head of Health and Wellbeing, DOH
Dr Darina O’Flanagan	Special Advisor to the NPHEt, DOH
Dr Siobhan O’Sullivan	Chief Bioethics Officer, DOH
Dr Michael Power	National Clinical Lead, Critical Care Programme, HSE Consultant in Anaesthetics/Intensive Care Medicine, Beaumont Hospital
Mr Phelim Quinn	Chief Executive Officer, HIQA

Members	NPHET
Dr Máirín Ryan	Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Health Technology Assessment, HIQA
Dr Alan Smith	Deputy Chief Medical Officer, DOH
Dr Breda Smyth	Director of Public Health Medicine, HSE
Mr David Walsh	National Director, Community Operations, HSE
Ms Deirdre Watters	Head of Communications, DOH
Mr Liam Woods	National Director, Acute Operations, HSE

As can be seen, representatives from across the healthcare landscape are included within the membership of the NPHET, including key agencies such as the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) and the Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA). The Chief Clinical Officer, National Director of Acute Operations and National Director for Community Operations are among the 11 representatives of the HSE on NPHET, as are the Interim Director of the Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the National Clinical Director, Health Protection. The NPHET also communicates directly with the HSE National Crisis Management Team which leads and manages the HSE's response.

In addition, the NPHET benefits from the insights of medical professionals working at the frontline of the COVID-19 response through the members representing the Irish College of General Practitioners, and from the disciplines of intensive care, infectious diseases, virology, psychiatry and geriatrics.

It is important to note that while NPHET is coordinating Ireland's public health response to COVID-19 it is supported by nine sub-groups including Acute Hospitals; Vulnerable People; Irish Epidemiological Modelling; Health Sector Workforce and others. The NPHET is also supported in developing its recommendations by an Expert Advisory Group. All told, there are in excess of 200 people representing over 50 organisations across academia, Government, community & voluntary sectors as well as the breadth of the health system. Each provides their clinical, policy, and operational expertise to inform the advice that is presented to Government in response to the pandemic. The full governance arrangements for the NPHET were published by the Government on 28 April last at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/de1c30-national-public-health-emergency-team-nphet-for-covid-19-governance/>

As the Deputy is aware, the NPHET is not an executive body in and of itself. Its members are drawn from across the public, voluntary and medical sectors and its remit is to provide me as Minister for Health, and the Government, with appropriate public health advice.

Those members of the NPHET who are officials of the Department of Health are accountable to the Secretary General of the Department and to me. The CEO of the HSE, Mr Paul Reid, has nominated the HSE officials sitting on the NPHET, and a similar situation prevails with regard to the other organisations represented on the NPHET.

The composition of any NPHET is dependent upon the nature of the threat being faced. In the current situation, in the face of a highly infectious and fast moving disease, where the understanding of the epidemiology of the virus is constantly evolving, it requires the flexibility to alter its membership on an ongoing basis and at pace in order to ensure that the appropriate expertise is available to deliver the best possible advice to myself and the Government.

I am in continuous contact with the Secretary General of the Department, the Chief Medical Officer and the Management Board of the Department and am consistently briefed on the innovative and flexible approach that is being adopted in responding to this devastating new global public health threat.

Covid-19 Pandemic

663. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the procurement arrangements and contracts signed throughout the Covid-19 crisis for PPE; the cost of this equipment; if consideration has been made on behalf of the State to purchase the machinery to manufacture this vital equipment; and the estimated cost of PPE purchases to date. [6782/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility for procurement issues, I have asked the agency to respond directly to the Deputy.

National Children's Hospital

664. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the financial impact the delays related to Covid-19 will have on the building of the national children's hospital; the current projected cost; and when the project will be completed. [6783/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The National Paediatric Hospital Development Board (NPHDB) has statutory responsibility for planning, designing, building and equipping the new children's hospital. I have referred your question to the NPHDB for direct reply.

Disability Support Services

665. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health if children and adults with a disability will be included in the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business setting out the way in which the Covid-19 restrictions will be lifted. [6869/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): The Government is committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities which will empower them to live independent lives, provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose, and enhance their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives. This commitment is outlined in the Programme for Partnership Government, which is guided by two principles: equality of opportunity and improving the quality of life for people with disabilities.

As the Deputy's question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

Cross-Border Health Initiatives

666. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if a cross-border directive application by a person (details supplied) will be reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5577/20]

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.

Dental Services

667. **Deputy Hildegarde Naughton** asked the Minister for Health the provisions being

made to provide dental surgeries with PPE; if consideration has been given to allowing dentists to buy PPE VAT free; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5617/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): A national approach to the supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for the Public Dental Service of the HSE has been initiated. Dentists contracted by the HSE under the Dental Treatment Services Scheme can apply to the HSE for PPE. Additional PPE, above the normal PPE used in dentistry, may currently be required in certain instances depending on the occupational risk assessment of the dentist. However, the Dental Council is deliberating further on this and definitive clarification is awaited as to if and when such PPE may be required.

Matters concerning VAT rates are the responsibility of the Minister for Finance.

Disabilities Assessments

668. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Minister for Health the last occasion a service has seen or assessed a person (details supplied) who was originally assessed when the person was four or five years of age; the status of the services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5618/20]

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 Appointments Status

669. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if a hospital appointment will be expedited for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5739/20]

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 response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer all non-urgent elective scheduled care activity, including outpatient clinics. This was to ensure patient safety

and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the World Health Organisation, and the National Action Plan published on 16 March. The trajectory of the disease means there is now an opportunity for increasing the provision of non-covid care including more routine care. It is envisaged that the private hospitals will play an important role in this regard.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working together to estimate the impact of Covid 19 on Scheduled Care waiting lists, in order to be prepared to address any backlog or pent up demand. My Department continues to ensure that the resources available throughout our health system are best utilised at this unique and challenging time.

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

670. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health when a child (details supplied) will receive a date for an operation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5744/20]

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 response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer all non-urgent elective scheduled care activity, including outpatient clinics. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the World Health Organisation, and the National Action Plan published on 16 March. The trajectory of the disease means there is now an opportunity for increasing the provision of non-covid care including more routine care. It is envisaged that the private hospitals will play an important role in this regard.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working together to estimate the impact of Covid 19 on Scheduled Care waiting lists, in order to be prepared to address any backlog or pent up demand. My Department continues to ensure that the resources available throughout our health system are best utilised at this unique and challenging time.

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 Staff

671. **Deputy Stephen Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health if agency staff recruited through a company (details supplied) for the Be On Call for Ireland campaign are in receipt of the same benefits as a member of the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5746/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Dental Services

672. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the provisions put in place to meet the needs of the public and private dental care sectors and the dental profession during the Covid-19 crisis and after the Covid-19 restrictions have been lifted [5753/20]

684. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Health when orthodontic treatment will be able to resume safely. [5799/20]

691. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Health the financial supports being put in place to assist dentists during the Covid-19 emergency; his views on the future of dental care in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5807/20]

699. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Health when orthodontists will be allowed to open their practices. [5820/20]

700. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O’Connor** asked the Minister for Health if assistance, financial or otherwise, will be provided to dental surgeries to cover the cost of PPE which will be required to be used as instructed by the Dental Council upon re-opening (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5821/20]

737. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Health the assistance available to the dentistry profession (details supplied) during the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6194/20]

753. **Deputy Louise O’Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the steps he is taking to assist dentists during the Covid-19 crisis; if they will be recompensated for PPE or provided with PPE by the State in order that they can continue to see patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6373/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 672, 684, 691, 699, 700, 737 and 753 together.

The necessary legislative amendments have now been made and the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) has worked with the dental profession and in particular the Dental Council, to provide revised guidance for the profession to allow for the resumption of the safe provision of routine care, including orthodontic care. This is in line with Phase 1 of the Government’s Plan for the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, from 18 May.

The Government has put in place a suite of measures to support small, medium and larger businesses that are negatively impacted by COVID-19. The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation has published a Return to Work Safely Protocol, which is designed to support employers and workers to put measures in place that will prevent the spread of COVID-19 in

the workplace. The Health and Safety Authority also provides information and advice for employers and employees in this regard.

A national approach to the supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for the Public Dental Service of the HSE has been initiated. Dentists contracted by the HSE under the Dental Treatment Services Scheme can apply to the HSE for PPE. Additional PPE, above the normal PPE used in dentistry, may currently be required in certain instances depending on the occupational risk assessment of the dentist. However, the Dental Council is deliberating further on this and definitive clarification is awaited as to if and when such PPE may be required.

Covid-19 Pandemic

673. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Health the medical basis on which the decision to include cinemas in phase five of the re-opening plan was made; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5758/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business, published on 1 May 2020, sets out an indicative path to the easing of COVID-19 restrictions and other actions in order to facilitate the reopening Ireland's society and economy in a phased manner.

In relation to Cultural and Social Measures, including the opening of cinemas where social distancing can be maintained, the Roadmap sets out the public health rationale as follows:

Public health rationale : Recognises need to balance social distancing with physical, cultural and social needs, to support mental and physical health and wellbeing. The public health rationale is to lift restrictions in such a way as to protect the ability to maintain social distancing prerequisite, thereby limiting the transmission rate and protect the capacity of the health system to cope with the inevitable increase in disease. This will be done where the visiting population density can be minimised. Restrictions on sporting, entertainment, culinary and cultural sites to be relaxed on phased basis linked to ability to maintain social distance, with emphasis on sport and exercise in the initial and early phases, and social aspects in the later phases.

Hospital Services

674. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the status of outpatient health-care appointments in particular colposcopies (details supplied). [5759/20]

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 response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer all non-urgent

elective scheduled care activity, including outpatient clinics. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the World Health Organisation, and the National Action Plan published on 16 March. The trajectory of the disease means there is now an opportunity for increasing the provision of non-covid care including more routine care. It is envisaged that the private hospitals will play an important role in this regard.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working together to estimate the impact of Covid 19 on Scheduled Care waiting lists, in order to be prepared to address any backlog or pent up demand. My Department continues to ensure that the resources available throughout our health system are best utilised at this unique and challenging time.

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

Covid-19 Pandemic

675. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of contact tracing episodes engaged in by relevant staff and organisations by date in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5763/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Covid-19 Tests

676. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of positive test results which have been followed up with contact tracing; the number of persons requested to self-isolate as a result of this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5764/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic

677. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients who have contacted their general practitioners or medical centre or primary care centre or a hospital expressing a concern that they may have Covid-19 symptoms and did not receive a test for the virus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5765/20]

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

Covid-19 Pandemic

678. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health his views regarding all members of the public wearing face masks when they are out in public and whether or not home-made

face masks would be beneficial in circumstances in which such face masks cannot be purchased by members of the public during the Covid-19 crisis; his further views on whether this should be mandatory; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5770/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): On 15 May the Government published guidance on face coverings as part of its actions under Phase 1 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business. The guidance is available here.: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/aac74c-guidance-on-safe-use-of-face-coverings/>. Guidance from the HSE is also available here: <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/face-masks-disposable-gloves.html>

Under the guidance it is recommended that everyone wear a face covering in situations where it is difficult to practice social distancing, for example in shops or on busy public transport. Advice in relation to home-made face coverings is also provided.

Departmental Correspondence

679. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if a reply will issue to correspondence from a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5771/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The necessary legislative amendments have now been made and the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) has worked with the dental profession and in particular the Dental Council, to provide revised guidance for the profession to allow for the resumption of the safe provision of routine care. This is in line with Phase 1 of the Government's Plan for the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, from 18 May.

The Government has put in place a suite of measures to support small, medium and larger businesses that are negatively impacted by COVID-19. The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation has published a Return to Work Safely Protocol, which is designed to support employers and workers to put measures in place that will prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. The Health and Safety Authority also provides information and advice for employers and employees in this regard.

A national approach to the supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for the Public Dental Service of the HSE has been initiated. Dentists contracted by the HSE under the Dental Treatment Services Scheme can apply to the HSE for PPE. Additional PPE, above the normal PPE used in dentistry, may currently be required in certain instances depending on the occupational risk assessment of the dentist. However, the Dental Council is deliberating further on this and definitive clarification is awaited as to if and when such PPE may be required.

A response to this correspondence will issue this week.

Covid-19 Pandemic

680. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health when persons aged 70 years of age are allowed to return to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5772/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Government has published a Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business to ease the Covid-19 restrictions and reopen Ireland's economy and society in a phased manner from 18 of May.

In relation to people aged over 70, the Roadmap states the following:

“The continued protection of people aged over 70 and those with underlying health conditions is in line with recommendations of WHO, ECDC and EU Commission which all recognise the importance of protecting the vulnerable populations. International and national evidence shows that those over 70 years and people with specific underlying health conditions are groups with an elevated risk for COVID-19. On this basis, it is recommended that the cocooning measures for the over 70s and for those in at risk groups be continued”.

Any future changes to the current public health measures and recommendations in place will be informed by the status of the on/off trigger criteria set out in the Roadmap and the public health advice received at the time that a decision is being made.

On 9 May the “Return to Work Safely Protocol - COVID-19 Specific National Protocol for Employers and Workers” was published. It provides clear guidance to employers and to workers on the measures that must be taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. The Protocol was developed through the cooperation of the Health and Safety Authority, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, the HSE and my Department. It is designed to be used by all workplaces to adapt their procedures and practices to provide protection against the threat of COVID-19.

In relation to vulnerable or at risk workers the Protocol advises that if an at-risk or vulnerable worker cannot work from home and must be in the workplace, employers must make sure that they are preferentially supported to maintain a physical distance of 2 metres. However, employers should enable vulnerable workers to work from home where possible.

The Protocol is not static. There will be ongoing engagement at a national level between stakeholders on its implementation and it is subject to change in line with the latest public health advice or other developments in order to maximise the protection it will afford in our workplaces.

Covid-19 Pandemic

681. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health when healthcare workers, that is, physiotherapists, podiatry practitioners and so on can return to practice (details supplied). [5773/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) Regulations 2020 (SI No. 121 of 2020) were signed by the Minister for Health on 7 April 2020.

Schedule 2 of the Regulations sets out essential services that are exempted from the restrictions and therefore can continue to be provided. This includes (at 15(b)) physiotherapy and podiatry services as these services are provided by a member of a designated profession within the meaning of section 3 of the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (No. 27 of 2005).

Hospital Services

682. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health his plans for both Our Lady’s Hospital, Cashel and St. Brigid’s Hospital, Carrick-on-Suir (details supplied); when the previous residents will be moved back; and if St. Brigid’s Hospital will resume its ordinary role as a palliative care facility. [5776/20]

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.

Hospitals Discharges

683. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients discharged from hospitals to emergency homeless accommodation in the past two years by month in tabular form. [5795/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly.

Question No. 684 answered with Question No. 672.

Health Services Staff

685. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of applicants signed up for the Be on Call for Ireland initiative; and the number of applicants deployed in each CHO area to date in tabular form. [5800/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Covid-19 Pandemic

686. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons tested for Covid-19 in each residential centre for persons with a disability in CHO9; the number of persons that tested positive for Covid-19 in each of these settings; and the new measures in place to reduce infection and protect staff and residents. [5802/20]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

687. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health his plans to ensure that the Covid-19 pandemic issues will be addressed on an all-island basis to the best possible extent; the level of cooperation in place at present between the authorities here and in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5803/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): A Memorandum of Understanding was for-

mally agreed by the Chief Medical Officers of the Department of Health and the Department of Health in Northern Ireland on Tuesday 7 April to strengthen North South co-operation on the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The MOU focuses on facilitating greater co-operation on areas such as: public health messaging, research, programmes of behavioural change, ethics, evidence base/ modelling, and public health and non-pharmaceutical measures. Other areas will be considered, such as procurement, where this is of mutual benefit.

Minister for Health Robin Swann MLA and I agreed the document along with our respective Chief Medical Officers, Dr Tony Holohan and Dr Michael McBride.

There has been significant engagement between us, our Chief Medical Officers, and our Departments throughout this pandemic. The MOU ensures timely and responsive communications and decisions in a fast-moving environment, and that both administrations will seek to adopt similar approaches, where it is appropriate to do so on the advice of respective Chief Medical Officers.

Covid-19 Pandemic

688. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Health his plans to ensure that suspected cases of Covid-19 in nursing homes are given priority and that tests and treatment be made a priority for these vulnerable persons; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that patients in nursing homes tested two weeks ago have not received their results to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5804/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): A significant programme of testing across Long Term Residential Care Facilities, including nursing homes, commenced on 17 April following a NPHEH recommendation. This programme is part of a range of measures and supports that have been put in place for this sector. The programme of testing for nursing homes involved the testing of all staff and residents in facilities where there was an outbreak and the testing of all staff in facilities that had no cases.

In addition, current guidance requires the testing of all staff and residents when a new case emerges in a facility that has not yet had a case. Analysis from the current mass testing programme will help inform and guide future testing strategy for long term residential care facilities. I understand that this will be considered by NPHEH in the coming week. It is important to note that testing should always be informed by a public health risk assessment and directed by Public Health.

Up to 13 May, the HSE advise that over 90,900 tests have been completed under the residential care facilities mass testing programme which includes nursing homes. It also advises that testing under this programme has now been completed in nursing homes (577 sites). Turn-around times have improved significantly but there remain examples of delays which is unsatisfactory. I am confident that the HSE is putting in place the measures to reduce turnaround times and we're seeing continuing improvement. It continues to streamline the process and to automate where possible so as to reach its target to have an average turnaround time of 1-3 days from referral to result.

Health Screening Programmes

689. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Health when CervicalCheck and other screening services will be operational; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5805/20]

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

Hospital Equipment

690. **Deputy Ossian Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter regarding consumable supplies (details supplied). [5806/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility for procurement issues, I have asked the agency to respond directly to the Deputy.

Question No. 691 answered with Question No. 672.

Departmental Correspondence

692. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied). [5808/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business, published on 1 May 2020, sets out an

indicative path to the easing of COVID 19 restrictions and other actions in order to facilitate the reopening Ireland's society and economy in a phased manner.

In relation to people with underlying health conditions, the Roadmap states the following:

"The continued protection of people aged over 70 and those with underlying health conditions is in line with recommendations of WHO, ECDC and EU Commission which all recognise the importance of protecting the vulnerable populations. International and national evidence shows that those over 70 years and people with specific underlying health conditions are groups with an elevated risk for COVID-19. On this basis, it is recommended that the cocooning measures for the over 70s and for those in at risk groups be continued".

The Roadmap specifies that decisions in relation to which actions will be taken and which public health measures might be lifted will be made in accordance with the Framework for Future Decision-Making which is as follows:

1. Before each Government consideration of the easing of restrictions, the Department of Health will provide a report to the Government regarding the following on/off trigger criteria:

- a. The latest data regarding the progression of the disease,
- b. The capacity and resilience of the health service in terms of hospital and ICU occupancy,
- c. The capacity of the programme of sampling, testing and contact tracing,
- d. The ability to shield and care for at risk groups,

3. An assessment of the risk of secondary morbidity and mortality as a consequence of the restrictions.

2. It will also provide risk-based public health advice on what measures could be modified in the next period.

3. The Government would then consider what restrictions could be lifted, having regard to the advice of the Department of Health as well as other social and economic considerations, e.g. the potential for increased employment, relative benefits for citizens and businesses, improving national morale and wellbeing etc.

4. It is acknowledged that there is also an ongoing possibility that restrictions could be re-imposed and this process will be carried out on an ongoing basis once every 3 weeks.

As is clear from the framework, it is the Government rather than I or my Department that will decide on any modifications to the current public health measures in place and those decisions will be informed by the status of the on/off trigger criteria and the public health advice received at the time that a decision is being made.

On 9 May the “Return to Work Safely Protocol - COVID-19 Specific National Protocol for Employers and Workers” was published. It provides clear guidance to employers and to workers on the measures that must be taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. The Protocol was developed through the cooperation of the Health and Safety Authority, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, the HSE and my Department. It is designed to be used by all workplaces to adapt their procedures and practices to provide protection against the threat of COVID-19.

In relation to vulnerable or at risk workers the Protocol advises that if an at risk or vulnerable worker cannot work from home and must be in the workplace, employers must make sure that they are preferentially supported to maintain a physical distance of 2 metres. However, employers should enable vulnerable workers to work from home where possible.

The Protocol is not static. There will be ongoing engagement at a national level between stakeholders on its implementation and it is subject to change in line with the latest public health advice or other developments in order to maximise the protection it will afford in our workplaces.

Departmental Correspondence

693. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Health if he will address concerns raised in correspondence from an association (details supplied) regarding couriers delivering to hospitals in the context of Covid-19. [5810/20]

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

Covid-19 Pandemic

694. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons that may be restricted from attending large social gatherings such as weddings as referenced in the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business under phase 5 of community health measures; the meaning of to be restricted in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5813/20]

823. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health if an update will be provided

for couples planning a wedding in September or October in view of the publication of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Businesses as a result of Covid-19; the number of guests that may be permitted at that stage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7040/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 694 and 823 together.

The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business, published on 1 May 2020, sets out an indicative path to the easing of COVID 19 restrictions and other actions in order to facilitate the reopening Ireland's society and economy in a phased manner. The Roadmap specifies that decisions in relation to which actions will be taken and which public health measures might be lifted will be made in accordance with the Framework for Future Decision-Making which is as follows:

1. Before each Government consideration of the easing of restrictions, the Department of Health will provide a report to the Government regarding the following on/off trigger criteria:

- a. The latest data regarding the progression of the disease,
- b. The capacity and resilience of the health service in terms of hospital and ICU occupancy,
- c. The capacity of the programme of sampling, testing and contact tracing,
- d. The ability to shield and care for at risk groups,
- e. An assessment of the risk of secondary morbidity and mortality as a consequence of the restrictions.

2. It will also provide risk-based public health advice on what measures could be modified in the next period.

3. The Government would then consider what restrictions could be lifted, having regard to the advice of the Department of Health as well as other social and economic considerations, e.g. the potential for increased employment, relative benefits for citizens and businesses, improving national morale and wellbeing etc.

4. It is acknowledged that there is also an ongoing possibility that restrictions could be re-imposed and this process will be carried out on an ongoing basis once every 3 weeks.

As is clear from the framework, it is the Government rather than I or my Department that will decide on any modifications to the current public health measures in place and those decisions will be informed by the status of the on/off trigger criteria and the public health advice received at the time that a decision is being made.

Covid-19 Pandemic

695. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Health the average gap in days between the date that Covid-19 victims died and when they are officially reported as deaths. [5814/20]

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

Covid-19 Pandemic

696. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if the proposed reopening of cinemas that can operate effective social distancing within their cinemas will be elevated to phase 3 of the reopening plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5815/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Government’s Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business, published on 1 May 2020, sets out an indicative path to the easing of COVID 19 restrictions and other actions in order to facilitate the reopening Ireland’s society and economy in a phased manner. The Roadmap specifies that decisions in relation to which actions will be taken and which public health measures might be lifted will be made in accordance with the Framework for Future Decision-Making which is as follows:

1. Before each Government consideration of the easing of restrictions, the Department of Health will provide a report to the Government regarding the following on/off trigger criteria:

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- b. The capacity and resilience of the health service in terms of hospital and ICU occupancy,
- c. The capacity of the programme of sampling, testing and contact tracing,
- d. The ability to shield and care for at risk groups,
- e. An assessment of the risk of secondary morbidity and mortality as a consequence of the restrictions.

2. It will also provide risk-based public health advice on what measures could be modified in the next period.

3. The Government would then consider what restrictions could be lifted, having regard to the advice of the Department of Health as well as other social and economic considerations, e.g. the potential for increased employment, relative benefits for citizens and businesses, improving national morale and wellbeing etc.

4. It is acknowledged that there is also an ongoing possibility that restrictions could be re-imposed and this process will be carried out on an ongoing basis once every 3 weeks.

As is clear from the framework, it is the Government rather than I or my Department that will decide on any modifications to the current public health measures in place and those decisions will be informed by the status of the on/off trigger criteria and the public health advice received at the time that a decision is being made.

In general, with the exception of public health advice, the responsibility for providing guidance in relation to a particular sector or on a specific activity remains with the Government Department with responsibility for that sector or activity.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

697. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the provisions in place for supports for children with special needs and or disabilities during the Covid-19 pandemic (details supplied); and if support will be provided in the home [5817/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): As the Deputy’s question refers to a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

Covid-19 Pandemic

698. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the definition of shopping centres which are permitted to reopen on 8 June 2020. [5819/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Government’s Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business, published on 1 May 2020, sets out an indicative path to the easing of COVID 19 restrictions and other actions in order to facilitate the reopening Ireland’s society and economy in a phased manner. The Roadmap specifies that decisions in relation to which actions will be taken and which public health measures might be lifted will be made in accordance with the Framework for Future Decision-Making which is as follows:

1. Before each Government consideration of the easing of restrictions, the Department of Health will provide a report to the Government regarding the following on/off trigger criteria:

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- b. The capacity and resilience of the health service in terms of hospital and ICU occupancy,
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- d. The ability to shield and care for at risk groups,
- e. An assessment of the risk of secondary morbidity and mortality as a consequence of the restrictions.

2. It will also provide risk-based public health advice on what measures could be modified in the next period.

3. The Government would then consider what restrictions could be lifted, having regard to the advice of the Department of Health as well as other social and economic considerations, e.g. the potential for increased employment, relative benefits for citizens and businesses, improving national morale and wellbeing etc.

4. It is acknowledged that there is also an ongoing possibility that restrictions could be re-imposed and this process will be carried out on an ongoing basis once every 3 weeks.

As is clear from the framework, it is the Government rather than I or my Department that will decide on any modifications to the current public health measures in place and those decisions will be informed by the status of the on/off trigger criteria and the public health advice received at the time that a decision is being made.

In general, with the exception of public health matters, the responsibility for providing guidance and advice in relation to a particular sector or on a specific activity remains with the Government Department with responsibility for that sector or activity.

Questions Nos. 699 and 700 answered with Question No. 672.

Covid-19 Pandemic

701. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health when a private gym that gives personal training sessions on a one-to-one basis and can maintain social distancing and is not a public gym open to anyone other than one person at a time which is in a property large enough to ensure all social distancing can be reopened to meet persons on a one-to-one basis; and if he

will make a statement on the matter. [5894/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business, published on 1 May 2020, sets out an indicative path to the easing of COVID 19 restrictions and other actions in order to facilitate the reopening Ireland's society and economy in a phased manner. The Roadmap specifies that decisions in relation to which actions will be taken and which public health measures might be lifted will be made in accordance with the Framework for Future Decision-Making which is as follows:

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- c. The capacity of the programme of sampling, testing and contact tracing,
- d. The ability to shield and care for at risk groups,
- e. An assessment of the risk of secondary morbidity and mortality as a consequence of the restrictions.

2. It will also provide risk-based public health advice on what measures could be modified in the next period.

3. The Government would then consider what restrictions could be lifted, having regard to the advice of the Department of Health as well as other social and economic considerations, e.g. the potential for increased employment, relative benefits for citizens and businesses, improving national morale and wellbeing etc.

4. It is acknowledged that there is also an ongoing possibility that restrictions could be re-imposed and this process will be carried out on an ongoing basis once every 3 weeks.

As is clear from the framework, it is the Government rather than I or my Department that will decide on any modifications to the current public health measures in place and those decisions will be informed by the status of the on/off trigger criteria and the public health advice received at the time that a decision is being made.

Healthcare Infrastructure Provision

702. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health if the commitment to the building of a second cath lab at University Hospital Waterford will be reaffirmed; if so, the date on which a build contract will be signed off; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5927/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Estates unit in the Health Service Executive has been tasked with the delivery of additional capacity (infrastructure and equipment) nationwide in the effort for the containment and prevention of the spread of the Coronavirus - COVID-19. This has resulted in delays to works and schedules.

Funding has been allocated in the Capital Plan for the provision of 2nd Cath Lab at University Hospital Waterford. Planning Permission is in place for this project and applications for fire and disability certification are currently in progress. Preparation of contract documentation has

commenced; contractor selection is underway, and it is anticipated the project will go to tender before late July.

Hospital Services

703. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health when the subcontracted modular cath lab service provided by a company (details supplied) for diagnostic angiograms will recommence activity at University Hospital Waterford in view of the fact it has been closed since early February 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5928/20]

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.

Hospital Services

704. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health when the refurbishment works to the existing main cath lab at University Hospital Waterford will be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5929/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Estates unit in the Health Service Executive has been tasked with the delivery of additional capacity (infrastructure and equipment) nationwide in the effort for the containment and prevention of the spread of the Coronavirus - COVID-19. This has resulted in delays to works and schedules.

Building works have already been completed in respect of the refurbishment of the existing Cath Lab at University Hospital Waterford, they are awaiting the installation and commissioning of equipment as part of the Equipment Replacement Programme. It is expected the equipment supplier will be on site in mid-June to complete these works and estimated the equipment will be commissioned by late July.

Dental Services

705. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health the locations urgent dental services can be availed of in counties Laois and Offaly in view of the fact that private dentists are not working; the facilities available for dental work in hospitals in the counties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5945/20]

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

Covid-19 Tests

706. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of Covid-19 tests carried out by county to date in tabular form. [5949/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Departmental Correspondence

707. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health if a matter raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) in relation to the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business will receive a response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5954/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business was published by the Government earlier this month to ease the COVID 19 restrictions and to reopen Ireland's economy and society in a phased manner.

The roadmap advises that in re-starting economic activity not all the population should go back to the workplace at the same time, with an initial focus on less endangered groups and sectors that are essential to facilitate economic activity.

To complement the Roadmap, a National Protocol to protect the health and safety of workers has been developed. The "Return to Work Safely Protocol - COVID-19 Specific National Protocol for Employers and Workers" published earlier this month sets out information for vulnerable workers.

The Protocol advises that if an at risk or vulnerable worker cannot work from home and must be in the workplace, employers must make sure that they are preferentially supported to maintain a physical distance of 2 metres. However, employers should enable vulnerable workers to work from home where possible.

Hospital Services

708. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the position in relation to private consultants being able to see their patients in private hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5955/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): In response to the COVID-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer all non-urgent elective scheduled care activity, including outpatient clinics. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for COVID-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the World Health Organisation, the measures set out in the Government's Action Plan in Response to Covid-19 and the recommendation of NPHET. The NPHET has now recommended that steps be taken to resume non-urgent scheduled care in the context of the safe care guidelines set out by its Expert Advisory Group.

A major part of the Government's Action Plan was to substantially increase the capacity of healthcare facilities to cope with the anticipated additional demand. As part of the Action Plan to urgently ramp up capacity for acute care facilities, an arrangement was agreed with the private hospitals to use their facilities as part of the public system on a temporary basis, to provide essential services. Under the arrangement, all patients in the private hospitals are treated as public patients and their treatment is prioritised based on clinical need. A Heads of Terms of an Agreement between the HSE and the Private Hospitals was agreed at the end of March 2020 and all 18 of the acute private hospitals signed up to it. The arrangement is in place for 3 months up to the end of June, with an option to extend it. Under the Heads of Terms to the agreement, a decision to extend the arrangement must be notified to the private hospitals by the end of this month. The arrangement is currently under review and depending on the outcome, a decision will be made on whether or not to extend it.

Departmental Investigations

709. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if he will order an independent investigation into the reason for the death of 23 residents since 1 April 2020 in a nursing home (details supplied) in County Louth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5956/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): Since 2009 the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, is the statutory independent regulator in place for the nursing home sector, whether a HSE managed or a private nursing home. The Authority, established under the Health Act 2007, has significant and wide-ranging powers up to and including withdrawing the registration of a nursing home facility, which means that it can no longer operate as a service provider.

This responsibility is underpinned by a comprehensive quality framework comprising of Registration Regulations, Care and Welfare Regulations and National Quality Standards.

HIQA, in discharging its duties, determines, through examination of all information available to it, including site inspections, whether a nursing homes meets the regulations in order to achieve and maintain its registration status.

Should a nursing home be deemed to be non-compliant with the Regulations and the National Quality Standards, it may either fail to achieve or lose its registration status. In addition, the Chief Inspector has wide discretion in deciding whether to impose conditions of Registration on nursing homes.

During the response to COVID-19, Nursing homes continue to be regulated by HIQA, who under the Health Act 2007 have the legal authority to examine the operation of any facility under their remit.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

710. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health If consideration will be given to the request of a representative association in relation to the need to provide additional support for a sector (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5957/20]

812. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health his plans to provide additional financial support for community pharmacies in view of difficulties facing this sector as outlined by a union (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7026/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 710 and 812 together.

My officials and I have met with the Irish Pharmacy Union twice since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and engagement is ongoing in relation to the State supports which may be of benefit to the pharmacy sector.

Covid-19 Tests

711. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Health if the delay in providing Covid-19 test results to frontline staff and residents of Cregg House, County Sligo will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5958/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Covid-19 Tests

712. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health if positive cases of Covid-19 were identified in a facility (details supplied) among residents in the direct provision system by the HSE; and if so, the date on which these were confirmed or suspected as Covid-19 cases. [5966/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne): As the Deputy's question relates to a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for answer and direct reply to the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic

713. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health the location and date of the first Covid-19 positive cases identified in residential nursing homes. [5967/20]

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

Covid-19 Pandemic

714. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health the interventions made by the HSE and the HPSC in direct provision centres, specifically on-site visits or inspections of these sites by public health teams and staff. [5968/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne): As the Deputy's question relates to a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for answer and direct reply to the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic

715. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered allowing farmers markets to reopen with social distancing and other measures in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5981/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Following the announcement by the Taoiseach on Friday last that it was safe to proceed with the easing of the restrictions set out in phase one of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business, farmers markets can reopen with effect from Monday 18 May.

Hospitals Data

716. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the research carried out by his Department in relation to the number of hospital appointments that have been missed as a result

of hospital avoidance or cancellations in the health service since 1 March 2020; and if statistical information will be provided in this regard (details supplied). [6037/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): In response to the COVID-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer all non-urgent elective scheduled care activity, including outpatient clinics. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for COVID-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the World Health Organisation, the measures set out in the Government's Action Plan in Response to Covid-19 and the recommendation of NPHET.

In line with the expert advice, delivery of essential non-Covid care has continued to date, although at significantly lower volumes than previously. In particular, the delivery of cancer care, urgent surgery and trauma services are areas in which care continues to be delivered, often in alternative locations and using innovative methods of care delivery. Where possible, hospitals are working to provide services in a different way, which includes virtual clinics for some outpatient department appointments. Cancer services are continuing with prioritisation of time-sensitive treatment, and the ongoing review of the location of the delivery of cancer services.

The NPHET has now recommended that steps be taken to resume non-urgent scheduled care in the context of the safe care guidelines set out by its Expert Advisory Group. Guidance on patient pathways to mitigate the risks associated with the delivery of non-covid care, for patients and healthcare workers, and support safe delivery of care has been developed under the auspices of the Expert Advisory Subgroup of NPHET (EAG) and approved in principle by NPHET. This guidance includes, for example, guidance on screening, swabbing and use of PPE.

In collaboration with my Department's communications team, research to understand why some people are avoiding interacting with health services has been initiated. Findings from a survey and focus groups commissioned by the Department indicate that fear of infection is one of the primary factors influencing peoples' reluctance in attending for acute services. This data has informed the development of an advertisement campaign reassuring the public that GP services and EDs are available and open for business, with changes made to accommodate patients safely in the context of Covid-19. The campaign commenced on Monday 11th May, through national and local radio and social media, supported by local spokespeople and will be revised or concluded in line with impact seen on the ground.

In terms of understanding the impact of COVID-19 on waiting lists, the HSE and my Department are actively working to build methodologies for gathering relevant data to try to facilitate not only a better understanding of the health system at this time, but to try to model growing service demands as the year progresses and as the health system continues to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Outpatient waiting list at the end of April shows an increase of 5,636 in comparison to the end of March. The figure for those waiting less than 3 months has fallen by 24,076 in the same period, a reflection of the decrease in referrals by GPs. Meanwhile, the number of patients awaiting an Inpatient or Day Case (IPDC) procedure increased by 8,595 at the end of April when compared to the end of March waiting list. During the same period the number on the 'To Come In' (TCI) list (those with an appointment for a procedure in the next six weeks) has reduced by 5,427. Accordingly, a large part of the increase in the IPDC waiting list relates to patients moving back to the Active waiting list from the TCI list. While the IPDC waiting list figure at the end of April is indicative of fewer patients being treated, it is of note that there were also fewer patients seen in Outpatient clinics in the same period and as a consequence fewer patients were referred for procedures.

Addiction Treatment Services

717. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of phone calls made to the HSE drug and alcohol helpline between 1 February and 1 May 2020; the number made to the helpline between the same dates in 2018 and 2019, respectively; the number of the daily positive Covid-19 cases which are persons with hospital-acquired Covid-19; and the number of such persons that have lost their lives. [6038/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne): As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Long-Term Illness Scheme

718. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Health if organ transplant patients are excluded from receiving medications under the long term illness scheme and the drugs payment scheme; and if so, if transplant patients that require life-saving drugs for the rest of their lives will be made eligible to receive their medication under these schemes. [6043/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Long Term Illness Scheme was established under Section 59(3) of the Health Act 1970 (as amended).

The conditions covered by the LTI are: acute leukaemia; mental handicap; cerebral palsy; mental illness (in a person under 16); cystic fibrosis; multiple sclerosis; diabetes insipidus; muscular dystrophies; diabetes mellitus; parkinsonism; epilepsy; phenylketonuria; haemophilia; spina bifida; hydrocephalus; and conditions arising from the use of Thalidomide. Under the scheme, patients receive drugs, medicines, and medical and surgical appliances directly related to the treatment of their illness, free of charge.

There are no plans to extend the list of conditions covered by the scheme at this time. However, I wish to inform the Deputy that it is proposed that the LTI Scheme would be included as part of a review of the basis for existing hospital and medication charges, to be carried out under commitments given in the Sláintecare Implementation Strategy.

For people who are not eligible for the LTI Scheme, there are other arrangements which protect them from excessive medicine costs.

Under the Drug Payment Scheme, no individual or family pays more than €124 a month towards the cost of approved prescribed medicines. The scheme significantly reduces the cost burden for families and individuals with ongoing expenditure on medicines.

People who cannot, without undue hardship, arrange for the provision of medical services for themselves and their dependants may be entitled to a medical card. In the assessment process, the HSE can take into account medical costs incurred by an individual or a family.

People who are not eligible for a medical card may still be able to avail of a GP visit card, which covers the cost of GP consultations.

Covid-19 Pandemic

719. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the steps he has taken to ensure that reopening of all sectors happen in tandem on an all-Ireland basis; and if he will make a

statement on the matter. [6046/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): On the island of Ireland, coordination between the two jurisdictions can make a significant contribution to the management of COVID-19. Close cooperation and, where possible, alignment of public health advice and policy decisions can contribute to more effective management and containment of the virus. In recent weeks, each jurisdiction has published its plan for the unwinding of social distancing measures and it is most welcome that there is significant common ground between the two documents.

There is ongoing, close engagement with the Northern Ireland authorities in a variety of forums, at both political and official level, both on a North-South basis and as part of broader engagement with the United Kingdom.

The health administrations on both parts of the island have agreed a Memorandum of Understanding on Public Health Cooperation on COVID-19, which provides a framework for close consultation, coordination and cooperation. There are regular meetings on COVID-19 at political level, involving the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the First Minister and deputy First Ministers of Northern Ireland. These meetings can also include the Health Ministers and Chief Medical Officers from Ireland and Northern Ireland.

This close coordination will continue, and intensify, over the coming weeks as we each move to reopen business and society.

Maternity Services

720. **Deputy Hildegard Naughton** asked the Minister for Health the reason women in the Saolta Hospital Group are being allegedly discriminated against in relation to being allowed a partner attend their c-section birth; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that no partner is allowed into theatre to attend a c-section birth in University Hospital Galway whereas they are in University Hospital Castlebar; his views on whether the practice is acceptable; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6100/20]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

721. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Health if pharmacy students that are taking up full-time frontline roles within the health service during the Covid-19 pandemic will be paid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6102/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Department is not aware of any HSE identified need in the area of pharmacy to employ individuals post placement to facilitate the emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Health Screening Programmes

722. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 391 of 3 December 2019, the progress made in relation to securing a site (details

supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6103/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I am advised that the HSE's National Screening Service were due to initiate discussions early this year with owners of potential sites for a mobile unit in Buncrana.

I have asked the HSE to provide a direct up date to you in this regard.

Covid-19 Pandemic

723. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Health if a quarantine will be placed on all visitors from outside Ireland during the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business following on from Covid-19; if so, if this will include the common travel area with the UK in view of the large number of cases there; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6109/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): NPHEC has considered issues in relation to overseas travel, informed by World Health Organisation and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control guidance, approaches and learning from other countries, and reports of importation of cases in a number of countries following relaxation of restrictions.

As the number of indigenous cases here declines and Ireland eases some restrictions, the relative importance of the risk of importation of cases from overseas increases. The impact of any imported cases on disease spread would be all the greater in the context of easing of domestic restrictions and the resultant increased movement and contact between people. In addition, a significant increase in the number of cases in Ireland as a result of importation could have an impact on public compliance with public health guidance and restrictions. Ultimately, the suppression of community transmission which has been achieved and which should allow for greater resumption of social and economic life in Ireland could be endangered.

To date, Ireland has introduced a range of travel related measures including issuing advice against non-essential international travel on 13th March. As of 24th April, passengers arriving into Ireland from overseas are expected to complete the Public Health Passenger Locator Form and to self-isolate for 14 days. Self-isolation means staying indoors and avoiding contact with other people and is a more stringent measure than the stay at home requirements that apply to the wider public.

Intensive work is underway by my Department, in consultation with other relevant Departments and the Attorney General's Office, to finalise regulations to come into effect in the coming days that will make it mandatory for passengers arriving to the State from overseas to present a completed Public Health Passenger Locator Form.

My Department, in consultation with other relevant Departments, is also developing proposals to strengthen the 14 days self-isolation arrangements for travellers from overseas. These proposals will include possible enforcement measures. The issue of imposing mandatory quarantine for a 14 day period, to be considered as the situation evolves, was mentioned in the Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business.

It is intended that self-isolation arrangements will continue to apply to passengers arriving from overseas, irrespective of the country from which they are travelling. Passengers transiting to another jurisdiction and who will not be residing in the State, including transiting to Northern Ireland, will be exempt.

Covid-19 Pandemic

724. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health when tattoo parlours will be allowed to reopen under Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6110/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business, published on 1 May 2020, sets out an indicative path to the easing of COVID 19 restrictions and other actions in order to facilitate the reopening Ireland's society and economy in a phased manner. The Roadmap specifies that decisions in relation to which actions will be taken and which public health measures might be lifted will be made in accordance with the Framework for Future Decision-Making which is as follows:

1. Before each Government consideration of the easing of restrictions, the Department of Health will provide a report to the Government regarding the following on/off trigger criteria:

- a. The latest data regarding the progression of the disease,
- b. The capacity and resilience of the health service in terms of hospital and ICU occupancy,
- c. The capacity of the programme of sampling, testing and contact tracing,
- d. The ability to shield and care for at risk groups,
- e. An assessment of the risk of secondary morbidity and mortality as a consequence of the restrictions.

2. It will also provide risk-based public health advice on what measures could be modified in the next period.

3. The Government would then consider what restrictions could be lifted, having regard to the advice of the Department of Health as well as other social and economic considerations, e.g. the potential for increased employment, relative benefits for citizens and businesses, improving national morale and wellbeing etc.

4. It is acknowledged that there is also an ongoing possibility that restrictions could be re-imposed and this process will be carried out on an ongoing basis once every 3 weeks.

As is clear from the framework, it is the Government rather than I or my Department that will decide on any modifications to the current public health measures in place and those decisions will be informed by the status of the on/off trigger criteria and the public health advice received at the time that a decision is being made.

Departmental Funding

725. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the financial supports provided to an organisation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6115/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): In addition to the continuation of the existing HSE funding of €2.03m per year, the HSE and Pieta House have now formally agreed to additional funding of €114, 608 per month, equivalent to €343,824 per quarter once the current Government staffing cost schemes, of which Pieta House is availing, have ceased.

The HSE has committed to provide cash flow support on a monthly basis, with the position to be reviewed after each quarter. The funding is being provided to fund an additional 300 hours of high-risk clients and the quarterly review will ensure that any client who commences a programme of support can have reasonable assurance of its completion. The cash flow support is also contingent on continuation of the process of engagement with the HSE to work towards creating a more sustainable funding model for the organisation.

This arrangement will provide necessary support to Pieta as it, and the HSE, continue to work together.

Health Screening Programmes

726. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Health the projected number of smear tests that have not been carried out due to Covid-19 restrictions; the date normal operating times are expected to commence; the expected date for full capacity to be restored for carrying out smear tests; the plans in place to work through backlogs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6145/20]

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

Disability Support Services

727. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health his views on a project by a person (details supplied) in relation to outcomes in respect of the deaf community and a proposal on the measures to help create a more integrated society. [6152/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): I want to acknowledge the great work undertaken for this project, and I note that it has also been forwarded to Ministerial colleagues, who have policy remit for Education and Employment supports.

As Minister for Disabilities I have always believed that Disability is not a health issue, nor is it an education issue, or employment issue. It is an equality issue. Government has had a whole of Government approach to disability for a number of years. The Department of Justice and Equality is the lead for policy coordination for disability and equality.

Our National Disability Inclusion Strategy captures a wide range of actions across Government Departments that will impact on the lives of people with disabilities and is to be viewed as a blueprint for an inclusive, accessible and equal country that incorporates issues that affect quality of life, health, education and transport;

Underpinning the Strategy is a vision of an Irish society in which people with disabilities across the lifecycle enjoy equal rights and opportunities to participate in social and cultural life, can work if they want to do so, have choice and control over how they live their lives, and can reach their full potential.

Earlier this year, I published a mid-term review of the Strategy. When the Strategy concludes in 2021, my aim is for Ireland to be a better place for people with disabilities to live in, a place where people with disabilities are involved and consulted with on matters and decisions that affect their lives. It should be a country where people with disabilities can enjoy full equality, participate fully in our society, and enjoy a quality of life on a par with the rest of the population.

The NDIS provides a framework in which we can work to achieve this aim.

The Strategy is available on the website of the Department of Justice and Equality.

Disability Support Services

728. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the proposed reopening of disability services and centres. [6167/20]

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 Access

729. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered when osteopaths can resume work; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that many patients have been referred by their general practitioners to osteopaths for treatment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6169/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business, published on 1 May 2020, sets out an indicative path to the easing of COVID 19 restrictions and other actions in order to facilitate the reopening Ireland's society and economy in a phased manner. The Roadmap specifies that decisions in relation to which actions will be taken and which public health measures might be lifted will be made in accordance with the Framework for Future Decision-Making which is as follows:

1. Before each Government consideration of the easing of restrictions, the Department of Health will provide a report to the Government regarding the following on/off trigger criteria:
 - a. The latest data regarding the progression of the disease,
 - b. The capacity and resilience of the health service in terms of hospital and ICU occupancy,
 - c. The capacity of the programme of sampling, testing and contact tracing,
 - d. The ability to shield and care for at risk groups,
 - e. An assessment of the risk of secondary morbidity and mortality as a consequence of the restrictions.
2. It will also provide risk-based public health advice on what measures could be modified in the next period.
3. The Government would then consider what restrictions could be lifted, having regard to the advice of the Department of Health as well as other social and economic considerations, e.g.

the potential for increased employment, relative benefits for citizens and businesses, improving national morale and wellbeing etc.

4. It is acknowledged that there is also an ongoing possibility that restrictions could be re-imposed and this process will be carried out on an ongoing basis once every 3 weeks.

As is clear from the framework, it is the Government rather than I or my Department that will decide on any modifications to the current public health measures in place and those decisions will be informed by the status of the on/off trigger criteria and the public health advice received at the time that a decision is being made.

Healthcare Infrastructure Provision

730. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health the amount of funding allocated for capital works for St. Vincent's Hospital, Mountmellick, County Laois. [6162/20]

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.

Healthcare Infrastructure Provision

731. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health the amount of funding allocated for capital works for Abbeyleix Hospital, County Laois. [6163/20]

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.

Home Care Packages

732. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting for homecare packages in each county in tabular form. [6171/20]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

733. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to the use of interpreters as part of contact tracing efforts for workers with different nationalities that are working in meat processing factories to ensure that those workers, their families and communities are protected and that language is not a barrier. [6172/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

734. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health the number of Covid-19 tests which have taken place to date at hospitals (details supplied); the average waiting time for test results from the hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6173/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Covid-19 Tests

735. **Deputy Stephen Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health the details of the use of a laboratory (details supplied) for Covid-19 testing; if the HSE has reduced its planned or agreed use of the laboratory; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6192/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Covid-19 Tests

736. **Deputy Stephen Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health the details of the use of laboratories here for Covid-19 testing; if the HSE has reduced its planned or agreed use of these laboratories; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6193/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Question No. 737 answered with Question No. 672.

Health Services Access

738. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered introducing a respiratory task force and making rescue packs equivalent to the COPD rescue packs available on the NHS available to those that need them. [6195/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I have no plans at present to introduce a scheme such as the Deputy describes. However, these matters are kept under review in my Department.

Hospital Services

739. **Deputy Colm Brophy** asked the Minister for Health when he expects private hospitals to reopen for standard medical procedures for patients with private health insurance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6199/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): In response to the COVID-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer all non-urgent elective scheduled care activity, including outpatient clinics. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for COVID-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision

was in line with the advice issued by the World Health Organisation, the measures set out in the Government's Action Plan in Response to Covid-19 and the recommendation of NPHE. The NPHE has now recommended that steps be taken to resume non-urgent scheduled care in the context of the safe care guidelines set out by its Expert Advisory Group.

A major part of the Government's Action Plan was to substantially increase the capacity of healthcare facilities to cope with the anticipated additional demand. As part of the Action Plan to urgently ramp up capacity for acute care facilities, an arrangement was agreed with the private hospitals to use their facilities as part of the public system on a temporary basis, to provide essential services. Under the arrangement, all patients in the private hospitals are treated as public patients and their treatment is prioritised based on clinical need. A Heads of Terms of an Agreement between the HSE and the Private Hospitals was agreed at the end of March 2020 and all 18 of the acute private hospitals signed up to it. The arrangement is in place for 3 months up to the end of June, with an option to extend it. Under the Heads of Terms to the agreement, a decision to extend the arrangement must be notified to the private hospitals by the end of this month. The arrangement is currently under review and depending on the outcome, a decision will be made on whether or not to extend it.

Disability Support Services

740. **Deputy Colm Brophy** asked the Minister for Health when he expects disability services, particularly day services and respite care, will resume in care facilities, for example, a facility (details supplied) in Dublin 6W. [6200/20]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

741. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health if he is in the process of setting up a taskforce of scientists and industrial and health experts to deal specifically with planning for the 24-hour turnaround for tracking, tracing and isolation of contacts (details supplied). [6206/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): A robust process of testing, isolation and contact tracing is central to Ireland's public health strategy for containing and slowing the spread of COVID-19, as advocated by the World Health Organisation and the European Centre for Disease Control. A testing and tracing process with sufficient capacity and quick turnaround is one of a number of core criteria in determining when it is safe for countries to reduce restrictive public health measures.

The HSE, together with the Department of Health and other bodies, has worked hard in the last two months to develop Ireland's testing and tracing process, to expand capacity and to re-

duce turnaround times.

A designated team, led by a senior manager reporting directly to the CEO, has been established in the HSE to oversee the development, management and operation of Ireland's testing and contact tracing process. This includes responsibility for the scaling up of capacity and the speeding up of turnaround times with a clear focus on achieving ambitious targets and continuous improvement. On 14 May the HSE launched its Roadmap for testing and tracing with clear targets and arrange of actions to achieve these targets.

The work of the HSE on testing and contact tracing is informed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET). The NPHET oversees and will continue to provide national direction, guidance, support and expert advice on the development and implementation of Ireland's strategy to contain COVID-19.

Significant progress has been made over the last two months. 47 community testing centres have been established; over 40 laboratories are processing tests; 9 new contact tracing centres have been set up and some 1,700 public servants have been trained in contact tracing to support the work of public health departments. A quick testing referral pathway for GPs is in place, and new IT systems have been developed or modified.

Ireland's testing strategy has evolved as our testing capacity has grown. A number of changes have been made to the case definition so that anyone presenting with acute respiratory infection comprising the sudden onset of least one of the following symptoms (cough, fever, shortness of breath) can be referred for testing. A mass testing programme across nursing homes, mental health and disability facilities is nearing completion, and, as of this week, all close contacts of someone with Covid-19 will be automatically referred for testing. Our strategy is to target testing at those groups or populations where the virus is most likely to be and where it will do most harm.

The HSE advise that from this week it has the capacity to test 15,000 people a day. Turn-around times have continued to improve and the HSE advise that it is on target to complete the testing process from referral to the completion of contact tracing within 3 days or less in 90% cases.

It is important to recognise these systems and capacity have been developed from a standing start and to recognise the tremendous work which has gone in to getting us to the point we are now at. It is also important to recognise the context in which this is happening: Ireland is already testing at a higher rate than most countries and our targets are ambitious. Data published on 12 May shows Ireland ranks 4th highest out of 25 EU+UK countries in terms of tests completed as a percentage of the overall population.

The HSE continues to work intensively to further develop processes and turnaround times across the testing and tracing pathway and a range of further improvements will be rolled out in the coming weeks.

Medicinal Products

742. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health the number of children with spinal muscular atrophy eligible for treatment with the approved drug Spinraza; the number of those receiving the treatment; the reason for the delay in treatment for some of these children such as a child (details supplied); the way in which and when these issues will be addressed in order that all children can receive this vital treatment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6209/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The HSE has statutory responsibility for medicine pricing and reimbursement decisions, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013. The Act specifies the criteria to be applied in the making of reimbursement decisions which include the clinical and cost effectiveness of the product, the opportunity cost and the impact on resources that are available to the HSE.

I can advise the Deputy that on 11 June 2019, the HSE Leadership Team approved access to the drug Nusinersen (Spinraza) for children with Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) Type I, II or III on an exceptional and individualised basis.

To date, the total number of patients deemed eligible to receive Spinraza is thirty five. Children's Health Ireland (CHI) has confirmed that 18 patients are currently receiving Spinraza. Due to Covid-19, a number of patients who were due to commence treatment have been put on hold.

Individual applications for each patient are prioritised based on clinical need and a treatment plan and a date for administering the drug is agreed with their treating clinician.

The actual delivery of this drug to approved patients in a safe and sustainable way requires very specific and quite complex service arrangements to be put in place in CHI across all sites.

CHI has confirmed that in order to support the SMA service arrangements, recruitment is underway, as a matter of priority for a number of key positions. A primary focus of CHI is to appoint a physiotherapist and nursing co-ordinator (certified nurse-midwife) as a matter of priority. The nursing co-ordinator will coordinate the service as well as manage face to face communication with patients and their families.

I am advised that CHI is currently engaging with families regarding each child's individual treatment plan for the administration of Spinraza.

Covid-19 Pandemic

743. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Health if employees of a company (details supplied) are being treated in a hospital for Covid-19. [6211/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy. My Department does not provide information about individual activations or about individual cases of Covid-19 for reasons of patient confidentiality.

Covid-19 Pandemic

744. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health his plans to introduce legislation to quarantine passengers for 14 days coming into airports and docks; the type of cross-Border arrangements which will be in place for persons that have travelled to Northern Ireland into airports and docks there; and the way in which it will be implemented. [6212/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): NPHET has considered issues in relation to overseas travel, informed by World Health Organisation and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control guidance, approaches and learning from other countries, and reports of importation of cases in a number of countries following relaxation of restrictions.

As the number of indigenous cases here declines and Ireland eases some restrictions, the relative importance of the risk of importation of cases from overseas increases. The impact of any imported cases on disease spread would be all the greater in the context of easing of domestic restrictions and the resultant increased movement and contact between people. In addition, a significant increase in the number of cases in Ireland as a result of importation could have an impact on public compliance with public health guidance and restrictions. Ultimately, the suppression of community transmission which has been achieved and which should allow for greater resumption of social and economic life in Ireland could be endangered.

To date, Ireland has introduced a range of travel related measures including issuing advice against non-essential international travel on 13th March. As of 24th April, passengers arriving into Ireland from overseas are expected to complete the Public Health Passenger Locator Form and to self-isolate for 14 days. Self-isolation means staying indoors and avoiding contact with other people and is a more stringent measure than the stay at home requirements that apply to the wider public.

Intensive work is underway by my Department, in consultation with other relevant Departments and the Attorney General's Office, to finalise regulations to come into effect in the coming days that will make it mandatory for passengers arriving to the State from overseas to present a completed Public Health Passenger Locator Form.

My Department, in consultation with other relevant Departments, is also developing proposals to strengthen the 14 days self-isolation arrangements for travellers from overseas. These proposals will include possible enforcement measures. The issue of imposing mandatory quarantine for a 14 day period, to be considered as the situation evolves, was mentioned in the Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business.

It is intended that self-isolation arrangements will continue to apply to passengers arriving from overseas, irrespective of the country from which they are travelling. Passengers transiting to another jurisdiction and who will not be residing in the State, including transiting to Northern Ireland, will be exempt.

Prescriptions Charges

745. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 205 of 4 May 2017, 777 of 6 September 2019 and 501 of 5 November 2019, the consideration being given to the issue raised (details supplied); if this matter will be considered with greater urgency in view of the Covid-19 emergency and the fact that many in the vulnerable category are affected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6216/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): My Department is aware of the issue raised by the Deputy where a prescribed dosage requiring different medication strengths results in separate prescription charges and it is currently under consideration. Engagement with the HSE in regard to a solution is ongoing.

Departmental Data

746. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of residents and staff in nursing homes nationwide; and the number of same that have been tested for Covid-19. [6218/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Home Care Packages

747. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Health when a homecare package will be put in place for a person (details supplied). [6240/20]

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.

Health and Social Care Professionals

748. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Health if he will direct CORU to provide clarity and a solution for those participating in placement hours as part of their accreditation process (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6241/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): One of CORU's key functions as our Regulator of Health and Social Care Professionals is to assess education courses and provide assurance to the public that graduates of those courses meet the minimum regulatory standards and are safe to practise.

Each registration board at CORU has set a minimum hours practice placement requirement for a student to meet the standards of proficiency for registration. However, CORU's regulatory requirements are principle based, and there is scope for flexibility in how an education provider can meet these as long as any changes do not prevent learners from attaining the standards of proficiency for the profession. This means that education providers have flexibility to determine what constitutes a placement bearing in mind at all times the need for placement to support the achievement of the standards of proficiency.

Since the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland, CORU has been engaging in dialogue with a number of education providers who are encountering difficulties delivering and assessing elements of approved programmes, particularly practical placements.

CORU issued guidance to the education sector on 13 March 2020 as the first cases of COVID-19 were detected in Ireland. I understand that CORU have continued to engage with the QQI and the National Steering Group on Quality, Integrity and Reputation in Higher Education during COVID-19. CORU have advised that they are treating the matter with the utmost urgency and are continuing to engage with education providers to ensure the timely and safe graduation of this year's cohort of students.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Health and Social Care Professionals

749. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health his views on the situation that as part of the applied social care education process students are required to do placement hours in social care settings and that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a detrimental impact on the ability of students to complete placements; the steps he will take in relation to the perceived stalemate

between third-level social care course providers, CORU and students that have been informed that they will not pass the 2020 term and year due to the premature ending of student placements in social care settings and may not be awarded degrees as a result; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6262/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): One of CORU's key functions as our Regulator of Health and Social Care Professionals is to assess education courses and provide assurance to the public that graduates of those courses meet the minimum regulatory standards and are safe to practise.

Each registration board at CORU has set a minimum hours practice placement requirement for a student to meet the standards of proficiency for registration. However, CORU's regulatory requirements are principle based, and there is scope for flexibility in how an education provider can meet these as long as any changes do not prevent learners from attaining the standards of proficiency for the profession. This means that education providers have flexibility to determine what constitutes a placement bearing in mind at all times the need for placement to support the achievement of the standards of proficiency.

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I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic

750. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if clarity will be provided in relation to the measures that need to be taken by restaurants, cafés, publicans and hotels in phase 4 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business from 20 July 2020 onwards (details supplied). [6319/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): On 9 May the "Return to Work Safely Protocol - COVID-19 Specific National Protocol for Employers and Workers" was published. It provides clear guidance to employers and to workers on the measures that must be taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. The Protocol was developed through the cooperation of the Health and Safety Authority, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, the HSE and my Department. It is designed to be used by all workplaces to adapt their procedures and practices to provide protection against the threat of COVID-19.

The Protocol is not static. There will be ongoing engagement at a national level between stakeholders on its implementation and it is subject to change in line with the latest public health advice or other developments in order to maximise the protection it will afford in our workplaces.

In the first instance it is the responsibility of individual businesses to determine whether they are in compliance with the requirements of the Roadmap for Reopening Society & Busi-

ness and the Return to Work Safely Protocol to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. If specific guidance is required in relation to a business activity in a particular sector of the economy that advice should be sought from the Government Department with responsibility for that sector.

Health Screening Programmes

751. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the status of the full resumption of BreastCheck and cervical smear tests for those in need; and if his attention has been drawn to the concerns regarding the cessation of these assessments. [6359/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): In line with public health advice, the National Screening Service's population-based screening programmes BreastCheck, CervicalCheck, BowelScreen and Diabetic RetinaScreen were paused due to the situation with COVID-19.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, the National Screening Service has monitored the feasibility of restarting the four programmes, and assessing the associated risks. They are developing separate roadmaps for the recommencement of the four programmes. The programmes will restart as part of the HSE's overall plan to resume its paused health services as soon as it is deemed safe to do so.

As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Staff

752. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the imminent annual junior doctor rotation at hospitals is causing significant concerns for staff during the Covid-19 pandemic (details supplied); if the rotations will be postponed for a number of months to minimise the impact on frontline staff that are working very hard to manage the public health crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6367/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The decision to proceed with the NCHD changeover on 13 July this year was taken after detailed consideration and consultation, in particular with the Forum of Postgraduate Medical Training Bodies and clinical sites.

It was heavily weighted on the interests of trainees and training, whilst be cognisant of the Public Health advice and patient care. This decision has been communicated by NDTP and also individual Training Bodies. Many Specialist Registrars will be completing training and new Specialist Registrars must rotate into these vacant posts.

Rotating positions is always a challenge. It was for this reason that NDTP HSE have aimed to provide certainty regarding the changeover date to NCHDs as early as possible. With regard to accommodation challenges, there is temporary accommodation available for healthcare workers and information on same is available on the HSE's website. Induction is extremely important when commencing a new job and NDTP, HSE are aware that local employers are preparing to deliver as much as possible of this on-line and by utilising resources such as HSE Land.

This decision is being monitored, and obviously should there be a significant deterioration in relation to Covid-19, the decision will be reviewed accordingly. It is noted that the HSE intends that closer to the NCHD changeover, advice will issue from the National Health and Well

Being Unit to NCHDs who are required to rotate and also to local Occupational Health Departments. Also, the early commencement for interns this week, rather than July, and Senior House Officers rotating primarily within their geographical area will assist the transition. Whilst it is acknowledged that none of these measures is a perfect solution, they will mitigate challenges and assist NCHDs during this time and through changeover.

Question No. 753 answered with Question No. 672.

Covid-19 Pandemic

754. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Health if an automatic 14-day quarantine for all visitors by air or port will be enforced; and if resources will be made available for the enforcement of same. [6386/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): NPHET has considered issues in relation to overseas travel, informed by World Health Organisation and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control guidance, approaches and learning from other countries, and reports of importation of cases in a number of countries following relaxation of restrictions.

As the number of indigenous cases here declines and Ireland eases some restrictions, the relative importance of the risk of importation of cases from overseas increases. The impact of any imported cases on disease spread would be all the greater in the context of easing of domestic restrictions and the resultant increased movement and contact between people. In addition, a significant increase in the number of cases in Ireland as a result of importation could have an impact on public compliance with public health guidance and restrictions. Ultimately, the suppression of community transmission which has been achieved and which should allow for greater resumption of social and economic life in Ireland could be endangered.

To date, Ireland has introduced a range of travel related measures including issuing advice against non-essential international travel on 13th March. As of 24th April, passengers arriving into Ireland from overseas are expected to complete the Public Health Passenger Locator Form and to self-isolate for 14 days. Self-isolation means staying indoors and avoiding contact with other people and is a more stringent measure than the stay at home requirements that apply to the wider public.

Intensive work is underway by my Department, in consultation with other relevant Departments and the Attorney General's Office, to finalise regulations to come into effect in the coming days that will make it mandatory for passengers arriving to the State from overseas to present a completed Public Health Passenger Locator Form.

My Department, in consultation with other relevant Departments, is also developing proposals to strengthen the 14 days self-isolation arrangements for travellers from overseas. These proposals will include possible enforcement measures. The issue of imposing mandatory quarantine for a 14 day period, to be considered as the situation evolves, was mentioned in the Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business.

It is intended that self-isolation arrangements will continue to apply to passengers arriving from overseas, irrespective of the country from which they are travelling. Passengers transiting to another jurisdiction and who will not be residing in the State, including transiting to Northern Ireland, will be exempt.

755. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Minister for Health if progress been made on a mid-term review of the National Drug and Alcohol Strategy 2017-2025: Reducing Harm; Supporting Recovery - A health led response to drug and alcohol use in Ireland, and in particular a focus on the partnership approach and implementation structures that include Departments, relevant State agencies, drug and alcohol taskforces, voluntary and community sectors critical to the successful delivery of the strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6389/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne): The national drug strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, sets out government policy on drug and alcohol use until 2025. The strategy aims to provide an integrated public health approach to drug and alcohol use, focused on reducing the harms for individuals, families and communities and promoting rehabilitation and recovery.

The strategy contains 50 actions for delivery between 2017 to 2020. The implementation of these actions is monitored through the national oversight structures, supported by the coordinated system of monitoring, research and evaluation set out in the strategy.

The Department is preparing to carry out a mid-term review of the strategy at the end of 2020. This will provide an opportunity to reflect on progress in implementing the strategy, with scope to develop further actions between 2021 and 2025 to address emerging needs. All stakeholders will have an opportunity to contribute to this review through their participation in the oversight structures.

I believe that the national drug strategy is a dynamic process, with the flexibility to adapt to needs that may emerge over the lifetime of the strategy. The mid-term review is an opportunity to reflect on progress and to identify new challenges. The review is timely as it will allow policy to take into account the impact of Covid-19 on people who use drugs and on drugs and alcohol services and to plan accordingly for the remaining five years of the strategy.

Covid-19 Tests

756. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the domestic laboratory capacity available for Covid-19; the profile of capacity versus use since 20 April 2020 to date in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6390/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic

757. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE has put together a specific contract for Covid-19 medical and surgical waste; if so, the details of the contract or contracts; if such waste is being exported, the locations to which it is being exported to; the transport and handling arrangements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6391/20]

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

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

758. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if a specific action plan is being worked on for family carers including those that are caring for children with disabilities (details supplied); if so, the way in which this plan will be progressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6392/20]

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.

Voluntary Sector Remuneration

759. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Health when section 39 pay alignment with HSE salary scales will be implemented as has been implemented in section 38 organisations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6393/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The employees of section 38 organisations are classified as public servants and therefore, the employer is obliged to adhere to the salary scales as set out in the Department of Health consolidated salary scales.

Section 39 organisations, however, are private sector employers and are therefore not required to adhere to these salary scales. It is a matter for the individual employer to determine the terms and conditions of employment, including rates of pay, for its employees.

Covid-19 Tests

760. **Deputy Stephen Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health the position and process for retrospective testing for persons that are of the view they may have had Covid-19 prior to when testing commenced here; if this is being considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6395/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): At present real-time reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) is the gold standard for diagnosing suspected cases of COVID-19. There is no role for using this test as an indication of past infection. It can only detect whether there is active virus present at the time of the test.

However serological testing can be used to estimate the level of past exposure and immunity in the general population. Estimation of population age-specific immunity or past exposure to SARS-CoV-2 is one of the actions in Ireland's National Action Plan in response to COVID-19.

Following a request from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) the HSE and Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) are proceeding with plans to undertake a population sero-prevalence study. This work is being carried out jointly by HPSC and NVRL, in collaboration with the Central Statistics Office and Department of Health.

I understand that it is intended that an application to the National COVID-19 Research Eth-

ics Committee will be submitted shortly and that subject to ethics approval and completion of clinical validation of a suitable assay (i.e. antibody test) the aim is to start the seroprevalence study in the next 4 weeks.

Home Help Service

761. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether home help workers should be entitled to PPE and adequate sanitisers; if they have such access; and the steps he plans to take to ensure that this happens. [6414/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): The value of personal protective equipment (PPE) is recognised as additional protection for home support clients and staff. It should only be used where it is likely to be beneficial as outlined in the HSE's guidance on PPE. This guidance is continuously monitored and is subject to change as the COVID-19 outbreak evolves.

The HSE is providing enhanced PPE to an expanded range of settings, including to support the care of people in their own homes. Through a twice weekly PPE planning process, the HSE identify current levels of home support through which PPE requirement and supply is determined. Arrangements are being made in each CHO to facilitate access to enhanced PPE for all healthcare workers and service providers. Delivery of PPE for home support services goes centrally to multiple drop points in CHOs who then distribute PPE to all providers.

The provision of standard PPE (i.e. gloves, aprons, sanitising hand gel) to home support staff employed by approved private and not-for-profit providers remains the responsibility of those providers in accordance with service arrangements in place between those providers and the HSE.

Covid-19 Pandemic

762. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients in dialysis that have tested positive for Covid-19; if there have been deaths in dialysis units of patients that had tested positive for Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6422/20]

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

Covid-19 Tests

763. **Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick** asked the Minister for Health his plans to roll out antibody testing for persons that have recovered from Covid-19 with the aim of understanding if some of the population now have natural immunity;; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6427/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The ECDC has advised that immunoassays detecting specific antibodies against SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) will play an important role in the future for epidemiological surveillance, evaluation of immunity and the outcome of future vaccination studies. However, the reliability of serological tests remains a major issue as does the interpretation of what immunity means and how long it might last. These remain active research questions.

The ECDC have reported that over 60 rapid SARS-CoV-2 antibody tests have been CE marked to date, and many more continue to be placed on the market. Prior to the introduction new serological assays [antibody tests] clinical validation studies will be required to confirm that test performance can be replicated in the context in which the test is intended to be used.

Serological testing can be used to estimate the level of immunity in the general population. Estimation of population age-specific immunity or past exposure to SARS-CoV-2 is one of the actions in Ireland's National Action Plan in response to COVID-19.

Following a request from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) the HSE and Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) are proceeding with plans to undertake a population sero-prevalence study. This work is being carried out jointly by HPSC and NVRL, in collaboration with the Central Statistics Office and Department of Health

I understand that it is intended that an application to the National COVID-19 Research Ethics Committee will be submitted shortly and that subject to ethics approval and completion of clinical validation of a suitable assay (i.e. antibody test) the aim is to start the seroprevalence study in the next 4 weeks.

Covid-19 Pandemic

764. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE or the NPHE carried out an assessment or is following a specific WHO advice on the potential of recirculated air in aircraft to spread the Covid-19 virus. [6435/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The matter raised is more appropriate to my colleague the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport.

Hospital Services

765. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the breakdown of the expenditure on the agreement with private hospitals to incorporate their capacity into the public system in tabular form. [6471/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Under the agreement with the private hospitals payment to them will be on a cost only Open Book model whereby the hospitals will be reimbursed only for the operating costs properly incurred during the period. The costs that will be covered will be limited to normal costs of operating the hospital. The final cost will be verified by independent firms of accountants appointed by the HSE and the private hospitals and there will be an arbitration mechanism in place in the event of any disagreement. Since the purpose of the arrangement is to provide additional capacity to deal with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for which there is no definitive time horizon it is not possible to indicate a precise cost estimate attaching to the arrangement. The cost only open book model is therefore the most effective way of ensuring the arrangement is value for money for the State.

Under the arrangement a participating private hospital is due 80% of its estimated monthly costs in advance from the HSE. Actual costs incurred are subject to verification, as set out above and any difference is subject to a balancing payment or clawback in the subsequent month. The HSE has made advance payments for April totalling €90.2m and €22.2 in the first week in May. This is based on estimates provided by the participating hospitals and will be adjusted based on verified actual costs validly incurred over the period. As the hospitals are private enterprises,

the detailed information regarding payments to individual hospitals or hospital groups is commercially sensitive and therefore in line with the Heads of Terms regarding confidentiality these details will not be published. In the interests of transparency, it is intended to publish summary financial information regarding the arrangement in due course.

Assisted Human Reproduction

766. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Health when IVF services will be fully resumed. [6474/20]

775. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if he will give permission to IVF clinics to resume services following their suspension due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6611/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 766 and 775 together.

Private fertility clinics operating in Ireland suspended the provision of assisted human reproduction (AHR) treatment during the current Covid-19 emergency on foot of guidance issued by the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology (ESHRE) in mid-March.

However, on April 23 2020, ESHRE issued a new statement recommending that “once the risk of SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 infection is decreasing, all ART (assisted reproductive technology) treatments can be restarted for any clinical indication, in line with local regulations”, as well as a comprehensive document, the “ESHRE Guidance on recommencing ART treatments”, which contain a set of detailed recommendations for clinics planning to restart AHR treatment.

My officials inform me that, following the revised ESHRE guidance, the majority of fertility clinics at least have either resumed activities or have indicated that they intend to do so in the near future.

Nevertheless, as emphasised on the websites of the clinics, any decision regarding the resumption of treatment and services will be taken in a measured way in order to ensure the protection of patients and staff, and compliance with the “ESHRE Guidance on recommencing ART treatments”. It is also obviously incumbent on clinics to comply with the measures outlined in the Government’s “Return to Work Safely Protocol”, which apply to all workplaces in this country.

Respite Care Services

767. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Health when it will be possible to offer a return of respite care for special needs children; and his plans to safeguard such children. [6476/20]

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.

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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.

Medical Cards

768. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Health when the increased income threshold limits announced in Budget 2020 will be implemented for persons over 70 years of age (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6481/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): On December 16, 2019 the Government approved the drafting of legislation which, inter alia, would give effect to the Budget 2020 commitment to increase the medical card income thresholds for persons aged over 70. Substantial work has been undertaken by officials in this regard.

Medical Cards

769. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if an application for the over 70 medical card by a person (details supplied) will be expedited. [6492/20]

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

Hospital Services

770. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) can expect to have an operation on their back carried out in Letterkenny University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6495/20]

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 response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer all non-urgent elective scheduled care activity, including outpatient clinics. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the World Health Organisation, and the National Action Plan published on 16 March. The trajectory of the disease means there is now an opportunity for increasing the provision of non-covid care including

more routine care. It is envisaged that the private hospitals will play an important role in this regard.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working together to estimate the impact of Covid 19 on Scheduled Care waiting lists, in order to be prepared to address any backlog or pent up demand. My Department continues to ensure that the resources available throughout our health system are best utilised at this unique and challenging time.

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

Covid-19 Pandemic

771. Deputy Jack Chambers asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding the reopening of an outdoor activity business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6529/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): In the first instance it is the responsibility of individual businesses to determine whether they are in compliance with the requirements of the Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business. If guidance is required in relation to a business activity in a particular sector of the economy that advice should be sought from the Government Department with responsibility for that sector.

Covid-19 Pandemic

772. Deputy Mattie McGrath asked the Minister for Health when the 14 day self-isolating guidelines will be lifted for persons coming here in order to provide guidance to companies and groups which operate educational based tourism activities and had anticipated the arrival of students on exchange from Spain in the summer and for the 2020-2021 school year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6597/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): NPHET has considered issues in relation to overseas travel, informed by World Health Organisation and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control guidance, approaches and learning from other countries, and reports of importation of cases in a number of countries following relaxation of restrictions.

As the number of indigenous cases here declines and Ireland eases some restrictions, the relative importance of the risk of importation of cases from overseas increases. The impact of any imported cases on disease spread would be all the greater in the context of easing of domestic restrictions and the resultant increased movement and contact between people. In addition, a significant increase in the number of cases in Ireland as a result of importation could have an impact on public compliance with public health guidance and restrictions. Ultimately, the suppression of community transmission which has been achieved and which should allow for greater resumption of social and economic life in Ireland could be endangered.

To date, Ireland has introduced a range of travel related measures including issuing advice against non-essential international travel on 13th March. As of 24th April, passengers arriving into Ireland from overseas are expected to complete the Public Health Passenger Locator Form and to self-isolate for 14 days. Self-isolation means staying indoors and avoiding contact with other people and is a more stringent measure than the stay at home requirements that apply to

the wider public.

Intensive work is underway by my Department, in consultation with other relevant Departments and the Attorney General's Office, to finalise regulations to come into effect in the coming days that will make it mandatory for passengers arriving to the State from overseas to present a completed Public Health Passenger Locator Form.

My Department, in consultation with other relevant Departments, is also developing proposals to strengthen the 14 days self-isolation arrangements for travellers from overseas. These proposals will include possible enforcement measures. The issue of imposing mandatory quarantine for a 14 day period, to be considered as the situation evolves, was mentioned in the Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business.

It is intended that self-isolation arrangements will continue to apply to passengers arriving from overseas, irrespective of the country from which they are travelling. Passengers transiting to another jurisdiction and who will not be residing in the State, including transiting to Northern Ireland, will be exempt.

Covid-19 Pandemic

773. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health his views on the claim by the NPHE that following the introduction of guidelines, patients are not discharged from hospitals into nursing homes unless they test negative twice for Covid-19 before being moved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6598/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) for COVID-19 oversees and provides national direction, guidance, support and expert advice on the development and implementation of a strategy to contain COVID-19 in Ireland.

The NPHE is the mechanism for coordinating the health sector response to significant public health emergencies. It facilitates the sharing of information between the Department of Health and its agencies, including the HSE. It provides a forum for agreement on strategic approaches to public health emergencies. This approach is in line with the advice of the World Health Organization.

HSE guidelines aim to assist staff in residential care facilities, including nursing homes, in their management of COVID-19 cases, including in relation to decisions on transfer of residents, to hospitals, where appropriate.

The HSE through the Health Protection Surveillance Centre has developed an extensive body of guidance and support tools to assist staff in residential care facilities, including nursing homes, in their management of COVID-19 cases, including in relation to decisions on transfer of residents, to hospitals, where appropriate. The current relevant guidelines are the "Interim Public Health and Infection Prevention Control Guidelines on the Prevention and Management of COVID-19 Cases and Outbreaks in Residential Care Facilities and Similar Units" (version 4.1 dated 4 May 2020).

The advice states that "People with confirmed COVID-19 should not be transferred to a residential care facility [RCF] until 14 days after onset of symptoms with the last 5 days free of fever. In addition, they should have two nasopharyngeal samples taken at least 24 hours apart reported as not detected. Residents who fulfil the above criteria are not infectious and do not need any special considerations in terms of placement within the RCF."

The advice notes that: “For those hospitalised patients with a persistent positive PCR test for COVID-19, IPC precautions should be kept in place for another 7 days (i.e. for a total of 21 days) and then removed, provided the patient has no symptoms consistent with ongoing COVID-19 infection at this point. No further retesting is required, as the risk of transmission is extremely low at this point. After 21 days, they can then be discharged from hospital to residential settings, if well enough for discharge.”

Covid-19 Pandemic

774. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if he will allow places of worship to open again for individual visits and private prayer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6610/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Government’s Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business, published on 1 May 2020, sets out an indicative path to the easing of COVID 19 restrictions and other actions in order to facilitate the reopening Ireland’s society and economy in a phased manner. The Roadmap specifies that decisions in relation to which actions will be taken and which public health measures might be lifted will be made in accordance with the Framework for Future Decision-Making which is as follows:

1. Before each Government consideration of the easing of restrictions, the Department of Health will provide a report to the Government regarding the following on/off trigger criteria:

- a. The latest data regarding the progression of the disease,
- b. The capacity and resilience of the health service in terms of hospital and ICU occupancy,
- c. The capacity of the programme of sampling, testing and contact tracing,
- d. The ability to shield and care for at risk groups,
- e. An assessment of the risk of secondary morbidity and mortality as a consequence of the restrictions.

2. It will also provide risk-based public health advice on what measures could be modified in the next period.

3. The Government would then consider what restrictions could be lifted, having regard to the advice of the Department of Health as well as other social and economic considerations, e.g. the potential for increased employment, relative benefits for citizens and businesses, improving national morale and wellbeing etc.

4. It is acknowledged that there is also an ongoing possibility that restrictions could be re-imposed and this process will be carried out on an ongoing basis once every 3 weeks.

As is clear from the framework, it is the Government rather than I or my Department that will decide on any modifications to the current public health measures in place and those decisions will be informed by the status of the on/off trigger criteria and the public health advice received at the time that a decision is being made.

Question No. 775 answered with Question No. 766.

Covid-19 Pandemic

776. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if Article 2 of the European Convention of Human Rights dealing with the right to life will be taken into account when preparing guidelines in respect of ethical decision making by health professionals during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6612/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Article 2 is one of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR's) most fundamental Articles and is non-derogable. Article 2(1) places an obligation on the State not only to refrain from the intentional and unlawful taking of life but also to take appropriate steps to safeguard the lives of those within its jurisdiction.

The Ethical Framework for Decision Making in a Pandemic published by the Department of Health on 27th March seeks to ensure that public health measures in response to a pandemic are implemented in a manner that is equitable, reasonable, proportionate, in compliance with national and international law (including the ECHR) and which does not discriminate against particular groups or individuals. The ethical framework sets out clear ethical principles that will guide people in acting so as to produce the greatest good, to ensure the best use of resources and to ensure fairness. It also sets out the values or principles governing how decisions are going to be made.

The positive obligation of Article 2 finds its expression in particular in the ethical principles of minimising harm, duty to provide care and reciprocity contained in the Framework. Building on the Framework, on April 7th the Department published the "Ethical Considerations Relating to Critical Care in the context of COVID-19". In line with the principle of minimising harm, the document discusses the duty to use limited resources prudently and fairly to minimise the loss of life and suffering and produce the maximal benefit possible for individuals served by those interventions. The document makes clear that everyone is morally equally; that every life matters and that everyone should receive care. As per the procedural values outlines in the framework, any allocation procedure must be fair, clinically justified, transparent and documented. In recognition of the duty of care that State has regarding healthcare workers, the Department issued a paper entitled "Ethical Considerations for PPE Use by Health Care Workers in a Pandemic" on 21 April 21st which considers to what extent health care workers have an obligation to provide, or participate in the provision of, a medical intervention where there are constraints on supplies of PPE.

Health Services Access

777. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if his Department has considered the recommendations made to it by an association (details supplied) in relation to the restructuring of the public eye care system in view of the probable accumulation of a backlog of patients due to the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6641/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I am pleased to inform the Deputy that I had a very constructive meeting with the Association of Optometrists in Ireland (AOI) earlier this week at which these recommendations were among the issues discussed. I will continue to engage with the AOI and other stakeholders as we progress with a new model of eye care in line with the HSE Primary Care Eye Services Review Group Report.

Healthcare Infrastructure Provision

778. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Health the status of the planned new endoscopy unit and day care unit at Naas General Hospital; and if he will make a statement on

the matter. [6654/20]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

779. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Health if additional guidance is available with regard to social distancing for those with low sight or who are visually impaired or blind; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6681/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The National Council for the Blind Ireland (NCBI) established a National Helpline (1850 33 43 53) to provide support, advice and information to blind or vision impaired people during the Covid-19 pandemic.

I understand that the NCBI is currently developing guidance for employers as to what measures might be taken to facilitate blind or vision impaired employees.

My Department will continue to work with the NCBI to support blind or vision impaired people to comply with public health advice and protect themselves and others from COVID-19.

Ministerial Correspondence

780. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if a copy of all correspondence between him and both of his advisers between 17 and 21 April 2020 will be provided. [6690/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I have appointed two special advisers under Section 11 of the Public Service Management Act 1997.

It would be expected that there would be daily and ongoing interaction, including email, between myself and my advisers.

I will be more than happy to respond further to the Deputy in regard to a request for specific information.

Departmental Correspondence

781. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if a copy of all correspondence from 1 March to 1 May 2020 between the CMO and a person (details supplied) will be provided. [6691/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The role of the Department of Health is to provide strategic leadership for the health service and to ensure that government policies are translated into actions and implemented effectively. The Department supports the Minister and Ministers of State in their implementation of government policy and in discharging their governmental, parliamentary and departmental duties.

The Department's Management Board provides strategic leadership, direction and oversight in achieving the Department's corporate goals. It adheres to the principles of shared participation and personal and corporate responsibility for the operational success of the Department in

supporting the Ministers and Secretary General in the fulfilment of their statutory roles. The Board members are the Secretary General (Chair), Deputy Secretaries General and Assistant Secretaries, the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Nursing Officer.

It would be expected that there would be daily and ongoing interaction, including email, among members of the Management Board, including those referenced by the Deputy, across the range of issues arising in the health services, as part of the Department's day to day business. In the time period referenced by the Deputy, correspondence and interactions will have included a priority focus on the health system response to Covid-19, and the work of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in relation to which minutes are published on the Department's website. While the precise volume of this correspondence between any two individuals, including those mentioned, is not quantified, it is anticipated that considerable time would be required for the search, retrieval, and compilation of documents and their review from the perspective of data protection principles.

I will be more than happy to respond further to the Deputy in regard to a request for specific information about any of the range of matters under consideration by my Department, or by NPHE.

HSE Investigations

782. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE will establish an inquiry into the deaths of 23 persons from Covid-19 at a nursing home (details supplied) in County Louth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6692/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): Since 2009 the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, is the statutory independent regulator in place for the nursing home sector, whether a HSE managed or a private nursing home. The Authority, established under the Health Act 2007, has significant and wide-ranging powers up to and including withdrawing the registration of a nursing home facility, which means that it can no longer operate as a service provider.

This responsibility is underpinned by a comprehensive quality framework comprising of Registration Regulations, Care and Welfare Regulations and National Quality Standards.

HIQA, in discharging its duties, determines, through examination of all information available to it, including site inspections, whether a nursing homes meets the regulations in order to achieve and maintain its registration status.

Should a nursing home be deemed to be non-compliant with the Regulations and the National Quality Standards, it may either fail to achieve or lose its registration status. In addition, the Chief Inspector has wide discretion in deciding whether to impose conditions of Registration on nursing homes.

During the response to COVID-19, Nursing homes continue to be regulated by HIQA, who under the Health Act 2007 have the legal authority to examine the operation of any facility under their remit.

Nursing Home Accommodation

783. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the conditions required to be met in order for the RCSI Hospital Group to hand back operational control to the owners of a

nursing home (details supplied) in County Louth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6693/20]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

784. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health the detailed guidance for open water swimming instructors after 18 May 2020; and the limit to the amount of persons within 5 km of the beach who can avail of an open water swimming session (details supplied). [6701/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): My Department is not providing detailed guidance for open water swimming instructors or open water swimming sessions. Guidance in relation to activities in specific sectors of the economy should in the first instance be sought from the Government Department with responsibility for that sector.

Hospital Services

785. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health when private consultants will be able to start to schedule appointments and resume scheduling of procedures, in particular those which were cancelled due to the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6705/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): In response to the COVID-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer all non-urgent elective scheduled care activity, including outpatient clinics. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for COVID-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the Government’s Action Plan in Response to Covid-19 published on 16 March and the recommendation by NPHET. The NPHET has now recommended that steps be taken to resume non-urgent scheduled care in the context of the safe care guidelines set drawn up by its Expert Advisory Group. The HSE is currently examining how best to resume on non-urgent scheduled care work in line with these guidelines.

Under the Heads of Terms of the agreement between the HSE and the private hospitals the HSE has access to 100% of the capacity of those hospitals and they are linked with the Hospital Group for their region. Consultants who work wholly for the private hospitals have been offered temporary locum public patient only (Type A) contracts for the duration of the arrangement. Under the agreement all patients who are being treated in the hospitals will be treated as public patients and will be prioritised based on clinical needs. It is envisaged that the private hospitals will play a role in the resumption of non-urgent scheduled care work.

The agreement runs initially for 3 months from the beginning of April. The HSE is currently reviewing the operation of the arrangement with a view to deciding whether or not to extend it.

Commissions of Investigation

786. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider the establishment

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of a commission of investigation into the deaths of 23 residents of a nursing home (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6707/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): Since 2009 the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, is the statutory independent regulator in place for the nursing home sector, whether a HSE managed or a private nursing home. The Authority, established under the Health Act 2007, has significant and wide-ranging powers up to and including withdrawing the registration of a nursing home facility, which means that it can no longer operate as a service provider.

This responsibility is underpinned by a comprehensive quality framework comprising of Registration Regulations, Care and Welfare Regulations and National Quality Standards.

HIQA, in discharging its duties, determines, through examination of all information available to it, including site inspections, whether a nursing homes meets the regulations in order to achieve and maintain its registration status.

Should a nursing home be deemed to be non-compliant with the Regulations and the National Quality Standards, it may either fail to achieve or lose its registration status. In addition, the Chief Inspector has wide discretion in deciding whether to impose conditions of Registration on nursing homes.

During the response to COVID-19, Nursing homes continue to be regulated by HIQA, who under the Health Act 2007 have the legal authority to examine the operation of any facility under their remit.

Hospital Services

787. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Health if St. Michael's Ward in Beaumont Hospital is planning to resume providing inpatient detoxification and stabilisation services in 2020; and the stage of the Covid-19 restrictions at which the HSE plans to reopen inpatient detox and stabilisation services. [6712/20]

798. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Health if St. Michael's Ward in Beaumont Hospital has been closed; if so, the alternatives being put in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6838/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne): I propose to take Questions Nos. 787 and 798 together.

As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Services

788. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health when appointments for public or private consultants can begin to be scheduled again, in particular for consultants who deal with cancer patients in view of the fact an early diagnosis is of utmost importance to ensure it is treated successfully; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6714/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The National Action Plan on Covid-19 identified the continued delivery of cancer care as a priority, through ensuring the delivery of na-

tional specialities and maintaining urgent activity (including cancer rapid access clinics). In line with this, cancer services have continued following consideration of the risk:benefit ratio of treatment for individual patients, the prioritisation of time-sensitive treatment and the review of the location of the delivery of cancer services.

Medical Oncology services are continuing, some in private facilities. The National Cancer Control Programme reports that attendance remains relatively high. Radiation oncology is continuing at approximately 80% capacity. There will continue to be challenges to capacity for some time due to the ongoing need to ensure physical distancing and the clean-down of machines between treatments. The focus in relation to cancer surgery has been on maintaining urgent time-sensitive surgeries. In many cases the location of surgery has been moved to a private hospital. Rapid Access Clinics for breast, lung and prostate cancer continue to operate and people are being encouraged to visit their GPs if they have any concerns in relation to cancer or other health issues.

In relation to the arrangement between the HSE and the Private Hospitals Association, consultants who work wholly in private hospitals have been offered temporary locum public patient only (Type A) contracts for the duration of the arrangement. The patients in the hospitals will be treated as public patients and will be prioritised based on clinical needs, as with any other public patient. The patients will remain under the care of their existing consultant, if the consultant is a whole-time private practice practitioner who accepts the HSE's offer of a temporary contract, or if the consultant is already employed by the HSE.

If a patient's consultant does not accept the HSE's offer, the patient will have the option of being transferred to the care of another consultant as a public patient.

Hospital Services

789. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the reason outpatients attending for ongoing hospital treatments as they become available are being advised that under no circumstances should they attend; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6730/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): In response to the COVID-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer all non-urgent elective scheduled care activity, including outpatient clinics. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for COVID-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the World Health Organisation, and the National Action Plan published on 16 March. The NPHE has now recommended that steps be taken to resume non-urgent scheduled care in the context of the safe care guidelines set out by its Expert Advisory Group.

The HSE has advised my Department that hospital staff are in contact directly with patients who require urgent or time-dependent appointments and procedures and are progressing care and treatment in a safe and appropriate way. The HSE further advise that the delivery of cancer care, urgent surgery and trauma services are areas in which care continues to be delivered, often in alternative locations and using innovative methods of care delivery. Where possible, hospitals are working to provide services in a different way, which includes virtual clinics for some out-patient department appointments.

Information relating to hospital service disruptions, including information from specific hospital sites around continuation and disruptions to specific clinics is made available through the HSE website. This information is reviewed regularly to ensure the most up-to-date infor-

mation is available for patients, family members, and visitors. The information is available here: <https://www2.hse.ie/services/hospital-service-disruptions/hospital-service-disruptions-covid19.html>

HSE Reports

790. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health when the Valproate project response report will be published; if he will provide details of the recommendations in the report; if his attention has been drawn to the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review in the UK and the compensation scheme for persons affected by foetal anti-convulsant syndrome in France; his plans to take a similar approach here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6763/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The HSE's report on its Valproate Response Project has been considered within my Department, and I have received briefing from officials. The report describes the HSE's work on sodium valproate issues since the Valproate Response team was established in May 2018. This work has included the provision of an expert support service for people with concerns about exposure to sodium valproate; establishing a dedicated genetics clinic in Our Lady's Hospital Crumlin to improve access to genetic testing; supporting the development of a diagnostic pathway for foetal valproate syndrome; and improving the structures in place to support families affected by valproate syndrome. The HSE has also begun the development of a Programme for Women's Health in Epilepsy, which will coordinate the national response to issues relating to sodium valproate. The Project report was not written with a view to publication; however, it has been shared with the Organisation for Anticonvulsant Syndrome (OACS) Ireland charity.

There are no plans to hold an independent inquiry at present.

I am aware of the French Government's compensation scheme and the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review in the UK. I understand that publication of the UK Review's report has now been postponed until early July. I have asked officials to monitor developments on both of these issues.

Covid-19 Pandemic

791. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health the number of Covid-19 deaths by county and age bracket up to 10 May 2020 in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6764/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Under the Infectious Diseases Regulations 1981, and subsequent amendments, the Health Protection Surveillance Centre is authorised by law to collect information from doctors and laboratories, via Medical Officers of Health, about diagnoses of certain infectious diseases in Ireland. These diseases are referred to as notifiable diseases.

The most recent amendment to the Regulations is the Infectious Diseases (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 53 of 2020) added COVID-19 to the list of notifiable diseases.

Data is collected on COVID-19 related mortality for both lab confirmed and probable cases, in line with recommendations from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control in both hospitals and the community. We committed from the outset to collect the most extensive

data possible in order that the information could inform and guide the public health actions necessary to respond to the very serious threat posed by COVID-19. The Deputy might note that the collection of mortality data in Ireland exceeds that of many other countries in the world.

My Department was notified that up to 10 May 2020 sadly a total of 1,458 people have died. To protect the identity of those who have died, my Department does not provide a breakdown by county and age bracket.

Food Safety Authority of Ireland

792. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the financial challenge facing the local authority veterinary service on 30 June 2020 as a consequence of a cut in funding from the FSAI; the reason this cut is happening in view of the importance of the service to food production at this time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6793/20]

793. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to correspondence issued by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland on 12 May 2020 relating to the operation of checks in small slaughter houses post 1 July 2020; his views on whether this correspondence undermines attempts to secure the future of the local authority veterinary service which currently operates this service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6794/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 792 and 793 together.

The Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) is a statutory body established under the Food Safety Authority of Ireland Act, 1998 (as amended by the British-Irish Agreement Act, 1999). Although, the FSAI is funded through my Department, it is independent in the exercise of its functions.

The FSAI's key function is the enforcement of food legislation which is carried out on behalf of the FSAI by a network of official agencies under service contract, including the Local Authorities.

I am aware that the FSAI has been in discussion with the Local Authorities and the County and City Management Association (CCMA) for some time about the delivery of official food controls by the Local Authority Veterinary Service (LAVS), to ensure that this service is delivered in an efficient and effective manner.

My Department is keen to ensure that the FSAI and the Local Authorities agree on the immediate priority of ensuring that the LAVS continue to fulfil official controls by way of a renewed service contract that will facilitate stability in service, beyond the current one which expires at the end of June 2020. My Department is being kept advised by the FSAI of progress in this regard.

Hospital Consultant Contracts

794. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if consultants are prohibited from caring for their private patients if they sign the new public consultants contract; his plans to ensure continuity of treatment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6803/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Under the terms of the agreement between

the HSE and the private hospitals, provision has been made to ensure continuity of care for patients who were in a private hospital or receiving a course of treatment when the Heads of Terms for the arrangement was agreed. There are a number of principals underpinning the arrangement, including that for the duration of the arrangement the private hospitals will be used to treat public patients only and that they or the consultants working in the hospitals, will not be able to charge fees.

Consultants who work wholly for the private hospitals have been offered temporary locum public patient only (Type A) contracts.. The patients who are being treated in the hospitals will be treated as public patients and will prioritised based on clinical needs as with any other public patient. The patients will remain under the care of their existing consultant, if the consultant is already employed by the HSE or if the consultant is a whole-time private practice practitioner who accepts the HSE's offer of a temporary contract.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer all non-urgent elective scheduled care activity, including outpatient clinics. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for COVID-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the Government's National Action Plan in Response to Covid-19 and the recommendation of NPHE. NPHE has now recommended that steps be taken to resume non-urgent scheduled care in the context of the safe care guidelines set out by its Expert Advisory Group and it is envisaged that private hospitals will play a key role in providing this care.

Departmental Correspondence

795. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide all correspondence between his Department and the HSE relating to a nursing home (details supplied) from 1 March to 12 May 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6825/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): The HSE advised the Department that the RCSI Hospital Group took over the operational management of the nursing home in question on the 17th April 2020 to assist during a period of challenge arising from COVID-19. A range of supports have been provided by the HSE to support residents in the nursing home including:

- Consultant Geriatrician Support to support GP services including, reviewing and assessing residents
- Director of Nursing Support (Provide leadership in absence of Nursing home DON)
- Infection Prevention and Control Support (advice, education and training for staff)
- Occupational Health Support (review and support staff on sick leave)
- Clinical Nurse Manager (Assist with daily leadership in the home)
- Nursing staff to ensure safe staffing levels are maintained including two CHO community nurses
- Healthcare Assistants (ensure safe staffing maintained)
- Receptionist (Assist with communication with residents families)
- Contract Cleaners (Ensure hygiene standards maintained)

- Practice Development (Training in relation to PPE/Guidelines)

The HSE further advised that a wide range of measures were taken in order to control the spread of COVID-19 including that all residents are now nursed in single rooms; personal protective equipment is readily available;

In addition, I understand comprehensive testing of all staff and residents has taken place. Staff that were diagnosed positive had taken appropriate isolation precautions and they were being isolating at home, in line with national guidelines. The HSE advised that staff were beginning to return to their place of work post isolation.

The HSE has advised the Department that the situation has stabilised in the nursing home, the staff support in place had enabled safe staffing levels for residents and that there was currently no further spread of COVID-19. I further understand that nursing home management is in contact with families of residents. The RCSI Hospital Group will continue to monitor the situation closely, through daily contacts, which is happening across all of the designated nursing homes in its area.

Childcare Costs

796. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health his views on the statement by a union (details supplied) regarding subsidised childcare. [6830/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): My colleague, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Dr Katherine Zappone has regrettably announced that the Temporary Childcare Scheme for Essential Health Workers will now not proceed on the 18th May as planned due to the low take up rate of childcare services volunteering to participate in the Scheme.

Covid-19 Pandemic

797. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Health the guidance regarding persons exercising in groups of four as on 18 May 2020, specifically whether this means personal trainers being able to conduct classes of three or less outdoors thus allowing them to re-open their respective businesses. [6837/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business, published on 1 May 2020, sets out an indicative path to the easing of COVID 19 restrictions and other actions in order to facilitate the reopening Ireland's society and economy in a phased manner. The Roadmap specifies that decisions in relation to which actions will be taken and which public health measures might be lifted will be made in accordance with the Framework for Future Decision-Making which is as follows:

1. Before each Government consideration of the easing of restrictions, the Department of Health will provide a report to the Government regarding the following on/off trigger criteria:

- a. The latest data regarding the progression of the disease,
- b. The capacity and resilience of the health service in terms of hospital and ICU occupancy,
- c. The capacity of the programme of sampling, testing and contact tracing,
- d. The ability to shield and care for at risk groups,

e. An assessment of the risk of secondary morbidity and mortality as a consequence of the restrictions.

2. It will also provide risk-based public health advice on what measures could be modified in the next period.

3. The Government would then consider what restrictions could be lifted, having regard to the advice of the Department of Health as well as other social and economic considerations, e.g. the potential for increased employment, relative benefits for citizens and businesses, improving national morale and wellbeing etc.

4. It is acknowledged that there is also an ongoing possibility that restrictions could be re-imposed and this process will be carried out on an ongoing basis once every 3 weeks.

As is clear from the framework, it is the Government rather than I or my Department that will decide on any modifications to the current public health measures in place and those decisions will be informed by the status of the on/off trigger criteria and the public health advice received at the time that a decision is being made.

In general, with the exception of public health matters, the responsibility for providing guidance and advice in relation to a particular sector or on a specific activity remains with the Government Department with responsibility for that sector or activity.

Question No. 798 answered with Question No. 787.

Health Services Access

799. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Health when podiatrists will be permitted to resume services to clients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6858/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) Regulations 2020 (SI No. 121 of 2020) were signed by the Minister for Health on 7 April 2020.

Schedule 2 of the Regulations sets out essential services that are exempted from the restrictions and therefore can continue to be provided. This includes (at 15(b)) podiatry services as these services are provided by a member of a designated profession within the meaning of section 3 of the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (No. 27 of 2005).

Hospital Services

800. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Minister for Health the bed and staff capacity of the Silverbirch Unit in Blanchardstown Hospital; if this unit is currently in use; if not, the locations where the staff are currently employed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6863/20]

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.

Covid-19 Tests

801. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Minister for Health the status of testing, retesting and tracing of all staff and residents in nursing homes and residential units to allow the eventual opening of these facilities to visitors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6864/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Health Services Staff

802. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the reason a temporary physio-therapist from a health centre (details supplied) was laid off in view of the backlog of work; and when the person will be replaced. [6890/20]

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

Respite Care Services

803. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Health the provisions he has made for families that would normally access respite for their young children with special needs during the summer holidays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6914/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): As the Deputy's question relates to a service matter, it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

Dental Services

804. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Health if he has given consideration to allowing access to all adults in addition to the children and persons with special needs that already have access to emergency dental services provided by the 38 public health emergency dental centres operated by the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6915/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The HSE provides dental care to children under 16 and special needs patients through its dental clinics. Independent dental practitioners provide care to medical card holders through the Dental Treatment Services Scheme; to the self-employed and retired people who have the required number of social insurance (PRSI) contributions through the Dental Treatment Benefit Scheme; and to private patients.

The HSE established 38 emergency dental clinics for children and eligible public patients who may not have been able to access a HSE contracted dentist when care was restricted to emergency care. The HSE has reported that it was not aware of any indications that the private patient group had difficulty accessing dental care when it was restricted to emergency care only.

The necessary legislative amendments have now been made and the Health Protection Surveillance Centre has worked with the dental profession and in particular the Dental Council, to provide revised guidance for the profession to allow for the resumption of the safe provision of routine care. This is in line with Phase 1 of the Government's Plan for the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, from 18 May.

Covid-19 Pandemic

805. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health the number of contacts traced to date in the test and trace strategy for Covid-19; the number of contacts traced on average each day; the number of staff involved in contact tracing; the number of volunteers that came forward; the number deployed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6958/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Mental Health Services

806. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health if guidelines have been issued to mental health facilities advising them not to take in new patients under Covid-19 restrictions; if his attention has been drawn to any individual mental health facility no longer taking in new patients due to Covid-19; if there are alternative arrangements in place for patients that cannot access facilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6959/20]

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.

Mental Health Guidelines

807. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health if the guidelines provided to mental health practitioners will be clarified; the guidelines available advising mental health practitioners of face-to-face counselling particularly in relation to children; if his attention has been drawn to the need for the provision of mental health supports for at risk individuals particularly for children during Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6960/20]

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.

Speech and Language Therapy

808. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health if the measures for PPE for clinical speech and language therapists will be confirmed in view of the fact the lack of full recognition of elements of their work, for example, dysphagia and swallowing disorders are not recognised as an aerosol generating procedure placing them at an increased risk in their work. [7006/20]

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

Health Services Staff

809. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the details of the deal with a company (details supplied) and other recruitment agencies to recruit healthcare workers to deal with the Covid-19 crisis; the amount the company or other such agencies are being paid; the number of healthcare workers which have been recruited; the reason this method to recruit has been chosen rather than recruiting directly to the HSE in view of the fact a permanent increase in capacity across the health service will be needed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7023/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Health Services

810. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a series of matters (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7024/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I acknowledge that it is critically important for the Irish health service to develop the capability and capacity to project its health and social care workforce requirements to enable more effective and efficient planning.

Work is well underway in relation to implementing the actions stemming from the National Strategic Framework on Health and Social Care Workforce Planning, including cross sectoral engagements between the Health, Children and Education sector. Engagement is also ongoing between my Department, the HSE and the ESRI to build a modern, sustainable, evidence based and fit for purpose projection model. The outcomes from this work, aims to provide the intelligence to support more robust and effective discussions and decisions on health workforce resourcing to meet population health needs into the future.

The implementation of the workforce planning actions link directly with the Slaintecare action to build a sustainable, resilient workforce that is supported and enabled to deliver the Sláintecare vision.

In relation to workforce planning efforts during the current pandemic, there are numerous initiatives taking place to maximise the health workforce to meet the needs of the service during this time. These include increasing the hours of part time staff, rehiring retired clinicians, employment of students and recent graduates, redeployment of staff and encouraging those on career break to return early.

The Be on Call for Ireland initiative is a further means being used to create reserve pools of 'job ready' health care professionals' to use 'as and when' they are needed for the response to COVID-19. Those contracted via this initiative are offered a short term contract, which may be reviewed at a later date once the impact of the pandemic on the healthcare system is understood.

Concerning nursing education, between 2017 and 2019 the number of undergraduate training places for nursing and midwifery increased by 260, from 1,570 to 1,830. I am pleased to inform the Deputy that the first group of these additional students will be due to graduate in 2021 and be in a position to join the nursing and midwifery workforce.

Concerning future nursing pay, the 2019 Nursing Agreement provides for an Expert Review of the Nursing Profession. This Review shall examine those outstanding union claims as detailed in the Labour Court recommendation (LCR21900/21901). Department officials are currently examining how this Review can commence its activities in the current environment and I am looking forward to seeing a date set for this Review in the near future.

Concerning the implementation of the pay measures contained in the Nursing Agreement, in July 2019 the HSE commenced the implementation of those pay measures. The HSE has since issued all circulars to activate these measures including adjustments to allowances and the opening up of the applications process to the new Enhanced Nurse Scale. The HSE has advised that progress has been made in completing the roll out of these measures and many nurses and midwives will have already benefited from these changes. The HSE has also advised that, where it has identified locations where implementation is incomplete, they are working with those locations (including Hospital Groups and CHOs) to complete the process. For the avoidance of doubt, I would like to reassure those nurses and midwives that are due to benefit from this measures that all monies due to them shall be paid to them.

The preliminary data for April indicates that approx. 4,800 / 38% of applicants to the Enhanced Nurse / Midwife role have been appointed in acute operations. Some Hospital Groups have made considerable progress in appointing successful applicants to the new roles (c.50% of successful applicants in two hospital groups and 97% of successful applicants at CHI have been appointed) while at other locations, progress has been slower. My officials have requested the HSE to prioritise the continued implementation of the agreement.

For the latest status on the implementation of these payments, I have referred this matter to the HSE for direct answer and reply.

Hospital Services

811. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the details of the deal with the private hospitals and plans for maintaining the capacity to deal with non-Covid-19 related issues over the coming months; his plans for non-Covid hospitals; his views on whether all private healthcare and hospital capacity should be taken permanently under public control in view of the need for permanent increases in capacity needed to deal with Covid and non-Covid healthcare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7025/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Government published its Action Plan in Response to Covid-19, on March 16 2020. In anticipation of the projected surge in Covid-19 cases and the expected impact on the health care system, a major part of the Action Plan was to urgently ramp up capacity for acute hospital care facilities. A critical element of the strategy was to put in place an arrangement with the private hospitals to use their facilities as part of the public system, to provide essential additional acute hospital services for the duration of the emergency. The terms of the arrangement reflected the expected Covid-19 pandemic at time of signing. It is in place for three months up to the end of June, with an option to extend it. Under the Terms to the agreement a decision to extend the arrangement must be notified to the private hospitals by the end of this month. The arrangement is currently under review and depending on the outcome a decision will be made on whether to extend or not. Any decision regarding an extension would have to be considered in the context of the evolution of the Covid-19 pandemic and the most effective use of resources in tackling it. Therefore, while there is an option to extend the arrangement, it is not intended that the arrangement will be permanent.

Acute hospital preparedness for Covid-19 has focused on bed capacity, on protection of non-Covid care, and on a number of other areas including infection control. In line with the Action Plan delivery of essential non-Covid care has continued. In particular, the delivery of cancer care, urgent surgery and trauma services are areas in which care continues to be delivered, including in private hospitals.

The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) has approved a number of recom-

mendations relating to protecting and maximising the delivery of essential time-critical non-Covid-19 care alongside Covid-19 care. On 5 May, NPHET agreed that its recommendation of 27 March, in regard to the pausing of all non-essential health services should be replaced, from now on, in regard to acute care, with a recommendation that delivery of non-urgent scheduled acute care be determined by appropriate clinical and operational decision making.

Guidance on patient pathways to mitigate the risks associated with the delivery of non-Covid-19 care, for patients and healthcare workers, to support the safe delivery of care has been developed under the auspices of the NPHET's Expert Advisory Subgroup and approved in principle by NPHET.

As the system continues to deliver Covid-19 and non-Covid-19 care side by side over a more prolonged period, my Department and the HSE will continue to work closely together to protect essential non-Covid-19 acute care. The trajectory of the disease means that there is now an opportunity for increasing the provision of more routine non-Covid-19 care and it is envisaged that the private hospitals will play an important role in the provision of such care.

Question No. 812 answered with Question No. 710.

Covid-19 Pandemic

813. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Health the status of the guidance and provisions in place to assist family carers that have concerns regarding guidance on Covid-19 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7027/20]

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.

National Maternity Hospital

814. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health his views in relation to the ownership of the proposed site for the new national maternity hospital; if the site will be brought into full public ownership in view of the announcement by a religious order (details supplied) that it is to divest itself of St. Vincent's Healthcare Group which in turn is to transfer to St. Vincent's Holdings CLG; the information in his possession regarding the structure of the new entity; the principles involved; the proposed governance structure for the new hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7028/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I welcome the announcement by the Religious Sisters of Charity that the Vatican has approved the transfer of the Sister's shareholding in St Vincent's Healthcare Group (SVHG) to a new company, St Vincent's Holdings CLG. This development will remove any remaining concerns that religious influence might be brought to bear on the new National Maternity Hospital (NMH). It also paves the way for the finalisation

of the legal framework which will protect the State's investment in the new hospital and ensure that the new NMH will have clinical and operational, as well as financial and budgetary independence in the provision of maternity, gynaecology and neonatal services.

The governance arrangements for the new NMH will be based on the provisions of the Mulvey Agreement. The Mulvey Agreement was an agreement between the NMH and the SVHG which was finalised in November 2016, following extensive mediation discussions. This Agreement provides for the establishment of a new company - NMH at Elm Park DAC - and ensures that a full range of health services will be available at the new hospital without religious, ethnic or other distinction.

My Department continues to engage with the SVHG, the NMH, the HSE and the Chief State Solicitor's Office in relation to the legal framework. The new hospital, which will remain in State ownership, will be built on a site leased from the SVHG. The State will provide an Operating Licence to the NMH at Elm Park DAC and the SVHG to facilitate the provision of health services in the new building.

Hospitals Data

815. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the breakdown of the use of private hospitals to date; the average bed occupancy of hospitals since beginning of the private hospital deal by total and hospital; the number of surgeries or procedures carried out in private hospitals by speciality since the beginning of the private hospital deal; and the number of private consultants signed up to perform under the private hospital deal. [7032/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Government published the National Action Plan in Response to Covid-19, on March 16 2020. In anticipation of the projected surge in Covid-19 cases and the expected impact on the health care system, a major part of the Action Plan was to urgently ramp up capacity for acute hospital care facilities. A critical element of the strategy was to put in place an arrangement with the private hospitals to use their facilities as part of the public system, to provide essential additional acute hospital services for the duration of the emergency.

The HSE have advised my Department that they have been working with National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) to establish a mechanism to allow for return of electronic data from Private Hospitals. This data will be submitted to the Hospital Pricing Office (HPO) by the NTPF to allow the creation of a HIPE record. The system was set up on the week ending 18th May with guidance issued to private hospitals around the process for submission of data.

In order to ensure early reporting of activity the HSE put a manual data reporting system in place with private hospitals. This is initial data and is subject to validation. While the current dataset does not provide for the full range of information the Deputy has requested, details regarding bed occupancy and the volume of procedures undertaken by private hospitals from March 30th to 14th May, 2020 are set out in the attached document. This data is subject to validation.

In relation to the number of Consultants signed up to perform under the private hospital arrangement, the latest information from Private Hospitals indicates that as of 19th May 2020, 286 Consultants have signed up.

Hospital	Utilisation
Aut Even	21%

Hospital	Utilisation
Beacon Clinic	36%
Blackrock Clinic	39%
Bons Cork	66%
Bons Dublin	34%
Bons Galway	39%
Bons Limerick	1%
Bons Tralee	83%
Galway Clinic	16%
Hermitage Clinic	60%
Kingsbridge	0%
Mater Private Cork	42%
Mater Private Dublin	48%
Santry Sports Clinic	7%
St Francis Hospital	0%
St Vincents Private	80%
UPMC Kildare	71%
UPMC Whitfield	40%
Grand Total	43%

Protected Disclosures

816. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if he will publish the terms of reference for the investigation into the 35 page protected disclosure in relation to a nursing home (details supplied); if he will provide details, that is, grade and title of the person carrying out this investigation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7033/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): As Minister I cannot make any comment on protected disclosures received that could in any way identify the person who made the protected disclosure. The Protected Disclosures Act (2014) precludes the Department from discussing any matter in relation to the protected disclosures that could identify that person.

However, I can assure you that that all protected disclosures received in the Department are dealt with in the appropriate manner, in line with the legislation and the Departments policy and procedures to ensure appropriate actions are taken.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

817. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health the engagements he has had with the voluntary disability organisations as part of the response to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7034/20]

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.

In response to requests to the Ministers' office, Ministers (Harris and McGrath) had separate video meetings with Inclusion Ireland and Enable Ireland on 27 April.

Further meetings are scheduled with the Disability Federation of Ireland, the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Coalition and the National Council for the Blind Ireland.

HSE Disability Operations hold weekly telecons with a number of key stakeholders representing the interest of service users and their families, as well as provider organisations. These forums take the form of teams with each having specific and identified work streams. Taking this approach ensures that there is two-way communication as well as working groups with assigned tasks in response to the COVID-19 emergency.

(1) Provider/Service User Organisation COVID 19 Team which has representatives from;

- Disability Federation of Ireland
- Not for Profit Association
- Federation of Voluntary Bodies
- HSE

(2) Family, Service User and Carer Representatives from:

- Inclusion Ireland
- Carers Ireland
- HSE

There is active engagement and joint working between HSE and the above representative bodies in terms of linkage with other essential HSE shared services. For example, HSE is actively supporting their respective "helplines" in response to COVID-19 and have already networked these providers with that of 'Alone' and their newly established helpline under COVID-19. HSE advises that all disability providers maintain strong communication links with families. In this regard, where an outbreak of COVID 19 is confirmed families are contacted and kept informed of their loved ones' medical status.

Under the governance of the HSE's National Integrated Operations Hub chaired by the Chief Operations Officer, Disability Operations has a team in place with the responsibility for providing supports and capacity building training for the sector in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, a range of guidance material has been developed. The following web link is the central repository for disability specific guidance material during the COVID 19 emergency:

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/partner-resources/>

It contains guidance on:

1. Alternative models of care (non-residential)
2. Streamlined hospital passport for people with disabilities who are admitted to hospital

3. Use of PPE in Disability Services
4. Supporting adults in a community residence/at home
5. Supporting children in a community residence/at home

In addition, a series of “webinar” training modules to assist frontline staff during the COVID 19 emergency period are available.

Covid-19 Pandemic

818. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health the steps he has taken to address the shortage of PPE in private and public nursing homes in counties Offaly and Laois; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7035/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): The global nature of the Covid-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented demand for PPE and certain medical devices. The HSE is working hard to address the health service’s priority needs in the context of constrained supply, long supply chains, and complex delivery and logistics requirements.

PPE stocks are now distributed by the HSE via a central allocation system covering all healthcare settings, including public and private nursing homes. The HSE is also developing an updated PPE requirements and distribution model, in consultation with stakeholders.

As this is a service matter in relation to the specific areas mentioned by the Deputy I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to her as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic

819. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health the engagements he has had with an organisation (details supplied) with respect to the Covid-19 crisis from February 2020 to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7036/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): To date, between myself and my colleague the Minister for Health Simon Harris TD, ten meetings have been convened by means of teleconferencing with the organisation referred to in the Deputy’s question. Along with this I have engaged directly with representatives of the organisation throughout this period at various and regular intervals.

My officials and officials from the HSE and the NTPF are undertaking regular engagements and correspondence with the organisation, and ongoing open lines of communication between it and the Department remain in place.

Mental Health Services Data

820. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the number of vacancies that exist in mental health services for persons that are homeless in Dublin; when he expects these posts to be filled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7037/20]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

821. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if Covid-19 deaths are higher in areas of deprivation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7038/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Under the Infectious Diseases Regulations 1981, and subsequent amendments, the Health Protection Surveillance Centre is authorised by law to collect information from doctors and laboratories, via Medical Officers of Health, about diagnoses of certain infectious diseases in Ireland. These diseases are referred to as notifiable diseases.

The most recent amendment to the Regulations is the Infectious Diseases (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 53 of 2020) added COVID-19 to the list of notifiable diseases.

Data is collected on COVID-19 related mortality for both lab confirmed and probable cases, in line with recommendations from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control in both hospitals and the community. We committed from the outset to collect the most extensive data possible in order that the information could inform and guide the public health actions necessary to respond to the very serious threat posed by COVID-19. The Deputy might note that the collection of mortality data in Ireland exceeds that of many other countries in the world.

The data on COVID-19 related mortality which is provided to my Department does not differentiate between deprived and affluent areas.

Departmental Strategies

822. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of the National Strategy and Policy for the Provision of Neuro-Rehabilitation Services in Ireland; if the targets for 2019 have been met; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7039/20]

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.

Question No. 823 answered with Question No. 694.

Covid-19 Pandemic

824. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Health if a decision has been made as to

when holiday homes and caravan parks will reopen. [7041/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business, published on 1 May 2020, sets out an indicative path to the easing of COVID 19 restrictions and other actions in order to facilitate the reopening Ireland's society and economy in a phased manner. The Roadmap specifies that decisions in relation to which actions will be taken and which public health measures might be lifted will be made in accordance with the Framework for Future Decision-Making which is as follows:

1. Before each Government consideration of the easing of restrictions, the Department of Health will provide a report to the Government regarding the following on/off trigger criteria:

- a. The latest data regarding the progression of the disease,
- b. The capacity and resilience of the health service in terms of hospital and ICU occupancy,
- c. The capacity of the programme of sampling, testing and contact tracing,
- d. The ability to shield and care for at risk groups,
- e. An assessment of the risk of secondary morbidity and mortality as a consequence of the restrictions.

2. It will also provide risk-based public health advice on what measures could be modified in the next period.

3. The Government would then consider what restrictions could be lifted, having regard to the advice of the Department of Health as well as other social and economic considerations, e.g. the potential for increased employment, relative benefits for citizens and businesses, improving national morale and wellbeing etc.

4. It is acknowledged that there is also an ongoing possibility that restrictions could be re-imposed and this process will be carried out on an ongoing basis once every 3 weeks.

As is clear from the framework, it is the Government rather than I or my Department that will decide on any modifications to the current public health measures in place and those decisions will be informed by the status of the on/off trigger criteria and the public health advice received at the time that a decision is being made.

In general, with the exception of public health matters, the responsibility for providing guidance and advice in relation to a particular sector or on a specific activity remains with the Government Department with responsibility for that sector or activity.

Hospital Services

825. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the reason a person (details supplied) has had an operation cancelled; the reason they cannot have a 45 minute outpatient procedure carried out that will potentially save their sight; the current waiting list for this type of operation; and the length of time this person will have to wait for this sight saving operation. [7042/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Reducing waiting time for patients for hospital operations and procedures is a key priority for Government. In recent years, my Department has worked with the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) and made

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considerable improvements to improve access for patients waiting for high volume procedures, including cataracts. At the end of July 2017, the number of people waiting for a cataract procedure was 10,024. Since then the numbers waiting have improved and at the end of April 2020, they stood at 5,831, a reduction of 42%. In the same period the number of patients waiting over 9 months for a cataract procedure fell by 83% from 4,249 to 705. The ophthalmology Inpatient/Daycase and Outpatient waiting lists, as well as the cataract waiting list for end April 2020, are provided for the Deputy below.

In this context it should be noted that in response to the COVID-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer all non-urgent elective scheduled care activity, including outpatient clinics. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for COVID-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the World Health Organisation, the measures set out in the Government's Action Plan in Response to COVID-19 and the recommendation of NPHE. The NPHE has now recommended that steps be taken to resume non-urgent scheduled care in the context of the safe care guidelines set out by its Expert Advisory Group.

My Department, the HSE and the NTPF are currently working together to estimate the impact of COVID-19 on Scheduled Care waiting lists, in order to be prepared to address any backlog or pent up demand. My Department continues to ensure that the resources available throughout our health system are best utilised at this unique and challenging time.

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 treatment for the person concerned, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

[Oph and Cataract WL]

Covid-19 Tests

826. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter in relation to Covid-19 testing for a person (details supplied). [7043/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Addiction Treatment Services

827. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the specific challenges facing community projects that the attention of his Department has been drawn to regarding places for

residential addiction supports; the actions taken to alleviate them; and when access will be resumed. [7044/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Catherine Byrne): Officials in the Department of Health have been working with Drug and Alcohol Task Forces and the HSE Social Inclusion Services to ensure that services and supports continue to be provided for those with problem drug and alcohol use.

I have asked the HSE to investigate the issues raised by the Deputy and to reply to him directly.

Covid-19 Pandemic

828. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health when an activity working outdoors as a chainsaw sculptor in gardens, parks and open spaces can resume under the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7060/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The modification of public health measures approved by Government on 15 May include allowing the phased return of outdoor workers from 18 May with social distancing requirements continuing to apply.

Health Insurance

829. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter regarding the holders of private health insurance (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7108/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): A major part of the Government's Action Plan in Response to Covid-19 was to urgently ramp up capacity for acute care facilities. A critical element of the strategy was to put in place an arrangement with the private hospitals to use their facilities as part of the public system, to provide essential acute hospital services for the duration of the emergency. Following negotiations between the HSE, supported by my Department, and the private hospitals, an overarching agreement with the 18 private acute hospitals was agreed at the end of March. The details of the arrangement are contained in the Heads of Terms, which I laid before the Oireachtas on 16 April.

The decision to take over the use of private hospitals as part of the Covid-19 response has implications for private health insurers and their customers. Each of the private health insurers have since announced measures which are focused towards assisting health insurance customers impacted by the Covid-19 national response, which include partial refunds or reductions to the amount of premium payable during the period of the agreement.

The Health Insurance Authority, as the independent statutory regulator of the private health insurance market, advises individuals to check with their own insurance company to find out more information regarding the specific measures that are available to them. Consumers who have concerns about their individual policies can also contact consumer advisors at the Authority for further information (at email address info@hia.ie).

The arrangement with private hospitals is in place for 3 months up to the end of June, with an option to extend it. Under the Heads of Terms to the agreement a decision to extend the arrangement must be notified to the private hospitals by the end of this month. The arrangement is currently under review and, depending on the outcome, a decision will be made on whether

or not to extend it.

Departmental Contracts

830. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the amount spent on external consultants by his Department in 2019; the average hourly rate; if caps or limits on such spending are in place; the way in which conflicts of interest are managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7283/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Department of Health spent approximately €1.3 million on external consultants in 2019. It should be noted that not all invoices included hourly/daily rates, of those that did, the average hourly rate was €95 ex VAT. Where daily rates were quoted, a calculation was made based on a 7.5 hour working day.

The estimate for consultancy expenditure is set as part of the annual estimates process in the subhead A.7 and within the subhead H (Sláintecare). The value of approved consultancy projects within any calendar year does not exceed the value set in the estimates.

Staff involved in procurement in the Department must comply with all applicable EU and national procurement law and guidelines including the advice set out in the guidance note on “Ethics in Public Procurement” in relation to the disclosure of conflicts of interest. In relation to tender competitions undertaken by the Department, tenderers are obliged to disclose any possible or potential conflicts of interest to the Department as soon as it becomes apparent.

Animal Welfare

831. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the regulations in place to ensure that pets abused by owners are protected; and if he will conduct a review of the animal breeding and ownership legislation. [5953/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 provides a modern framework for applying standards in the area of animal health and welfare. The Act was passed, after a lengthy and constructive debate in both Houses of the Oireachtas and came into operation on 6 March 2014 and replaced a number of enactments dating back over a century. The Act is kept under constant review within my Department and, indeed, was amended last Summer by the Greyhound Racing Act 2019.

The Act applies to the welfare of all animals, including those kept as pets.

My policy and the policy of the Government has always been clear and consistent. Where instances of abuse, cruelty or neglect of animals are encountered, evidence is gathered and those responsible are prosecuted through the Courts.

Investigations are carried out by authorised officers of my Department, An Garda Síochána, Customs and Excise and authorised officers of the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Dublin Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. In addition, the chief executive of each local authority may appoint authorised officers to exercise functions under the Act in the functional area of the local authority concerned.

Since the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 came into operation in March 2014, over 100 cases have been prosecuted through the Courts. Fines in excess of €60,000 have been imposed. Seven persons have been sentenced to a term of imprisonment; these sentences were suspended

in four cases. The Probation Act was applied in eight instances.

Sixteen persons have been disqualified from keeping animals under section 58 of the Act.

A number of cases remain before the Courts and further files have been sent to the Chief State Solicitor with a view to instituting proceedings; other files are currently being examined in my Department with a view to pursuing a prosecution.

I would encourage anyone who has evidence of a breach of animal welfare to report it to the Animal Welfare Hotline operated by my Department. The phone numbers of the hotline are as follows: Call Save: 076 1064408 Phone: 01 6072379

Details of suspected breaches of animal welfare can also be emailed to animalwelfare@agriculture.gov.ie.

Greyhound Industry

832. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when greyhound racing can resume under the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7058/20]

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.

On 1 May 2020, the Taoiseach set out a roadmap for easing the Covid -19 restrictions, which began on Monday 18 May. The Government plans to reopen the economy and society in a slow and phased manner. The roadmap sets out five stages for unlocking restrictions, at three week intervals.

It is currently envisaged that greyhound racing will recommence in stage 3 of the process which is currently scheduled to start on 29 June 2020.

Departmental Strategies

833. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a regulatory impact analysis of the farm to fork strategy has been carried out; if so, if the analysis will be made available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5518/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The Farm to Fork Strategy is currently under development by the EU Commission. The Strategy is scheduled for publication later this month.

The Commission have advised that no impact assessment will be carried out ahead of the adoption of the strategy as a whole. They have also advised that Relevant Better Regulation tools will be applied to the individual initiatives of the strategy. Impact assessments will be carried out where such initiatives are expected to produce significant environmental, social or economic impacts.

Common Agricultural Policy

834. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the CAP funding allocation will be adversely affected by other agricultural support arrangements put in place by the EU; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5519/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The European Commission has proposed, as part of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2021-2027, an overall cut of approximately 5% to CAP post 2020 funding. The proposed cut is comprised of a 3.9% cut to Pillar 1 (direct payments) and a 15% cut to Pillar 2 (rural development) funding.

I am not aware of any specific proposals for agricultural supports outside of the CAP but clearly the overall budgetary discussions are taking place within the context of financial demands in other areas including the COVID response and Just Transition in the context of climate ambition, migration and security.

I will continue to work hard with my European counterparts, and with Commissioner Wojciechowski, to build consensus around the need to maintain a strong CAP budget post-2020.

EU Directives

835. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the establishment of an independent statutory body will be considered tasked with enforcing the provisions of the EU directive on unfair trading practices in the agricultural and food supply chain; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5520/20]

840. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider establishing an independent statutory body tasked with enforcing the provisions of the EU directive on unfair trading practices in the agricultural and food supply chain; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5596/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I propose to take Questions Nos. 835 and 840 together.

Directive (EU) 2019/633 on Unfair Trading Practices in Business-to-Business Relationships in the Agricultural and Food Supply Chain (UTP Directive), came into force on 30 April 2019. EU Law requires that the Directive must be transposed into national law by 1 May 2021.

The UTP Directive provides a minimum Union standard of protection to suppliers, including farmers, in the agricultural and food supply chain against certain specific unfair trading practises and requires the designation of an Enforcement Authority to discharge the duties of the UTP Directive. The Enforcement Authority can be a new or existing entity.

A stakeholder consultation process was held in December 2019 which invited submissions from interested parties on the transposition and enforcement of the EU Directive, including on the form the Enforcement Authority should take. Some 657 responses were received. These responses are currently being analysed. A decision on the designation of the Enforcement Agency will be made in due course.

Departmental Contracts

836. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department has engaged the use of external consultants from 1 January 2020 to date; the details and costs of such engagements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5522/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I wish to advise the Deputy that the information requested on the engagement of external consultants by my Department from 1 January 2020 to date is set out in the table.

2020

Company	Details of Engagements	Cost €
HBE	Legionella Risk Assessment DAFM facilities T9 and T10 Dublin Port	1,919
RSK ADAS UK LTD(formerly ADAS UK Ltd.)	An Evaluation of the Green Low –Carbon Agri-Environment Scheme (GLAS) Required under EU legislation.	108,536
Grant Thornton	Transparency reports for beef sector (3 reports)	98,000
ERNST & YOUNG	Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine – Annual Accounts Certification – Financial Year 2019 & 2020	379,014
Grant Thornton	Cost Benefit Analysis of the TB Programme	106,272
Grant Thornton	Analysis of On Farm Market Valuation	97,170
Deloitte Ireland	Technical Vulnerability and Security Assessment	61,439
Deloitte	Preparation of Cyber Response plan	7,995
RSM Ireland	Evaluation of EMFF OP 2014-2020	109,750
Quality Wizard	ISO 17025: 2017 Consultancy	6,150
FSD – Forest Environmental Research and Services Ltd	UNFCCC/EU LULUCF reporting and development of projections and scenario models.	36,234
NFI – IFER Monitoring and Mapping	Use of proprietary IFER software to compile Ireland's National Forest Inventory and compilation of reports.	56,868
UCD	Soil identification training course	2,460
BEC Consultants	Vegetation assessment training	1,838

Agriculture Scheme Appeals

837. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a review lodged by a person (details supplied) in County Galway in respect of an overclaim assessed against them is under consideration; if so, when a decision will be made on this review in view of the serious effect Covid-19 is having on the person's income and the importance of farm payments being issued to farmers in a timely manner as a result of the impact Covid-19 is having on livestock prices; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5569/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): My Department reviews all agricultural land parcels in the country on a rolling basis with the whole coun-

try being reviewed every three years. All the latest available imagery is reviewed and any ineligible features identified within a land parcel are removed. The area of the parcel is adjusted where necessary and, if appropriate, any overpayment is addressed. Scheme applicants are notified accordingly, and they are given the option, should they wish, to seek a review of any overclaims arising from this process.

In this regard, land parcels submitted under the 2018 Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) by the person named were subject to an imagery review. Following the imagery review, the Maximum Eligible Area (MEA) of 14 land parcels were reduced and this led to overclaims on the parcels.

A letter issued to the person named on 30 May 2019 outlining the position and the options available to him. These overclaims resulted in a reduction of his 2018 BPS payment and an overpayment was applied. An agricultural advisor submitted a response on behalf of the person named. The advisor stated that they did not agree to the reduced MEA on 12 out of the 14 parcels and requested a further review.

This review was carried out, which took into account the particular landscape of the area and is now completed. This review has made adjustments to the MEAs which has meant that the person named no longer has over claims on his 2018 BPS. The person named also received a balancing payment to his 2018 BPS on 30 March 2020 which has negated the original deduction. Thus, the BPS 2018 payments for the person named are up to date.

Felling Licences

838. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a tree felling licence application by a person (details supplied) will be expedited; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5579/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): An application for a tree felling licence was received from the person named in July, 2019.

Every application for a forestry licence must undergo careful assessment for the potential effects the proposed operations may have, on its own or in combination with other plans or projects in the area. The proposed site contains archaeological features and an archaeologist's report was requested and received.

In addition to this, on initial examination of this application, it was determined that 13 designated sites were proximate to the tree felling site. There is a possibility that the proposed tree felling may have an impact on one of these sites – the Lower River Shannon SAC and because of this an Appropriate Assessment report and determination or Natura Impact Statement (NIS) will be required.

Officials of my Department will complete the Appropriate Assessment report and determination. However, the person named should be aware that there is a backlog of applications awaiting completion of assessments. The person named may, however, have an NIS completed by a suitably qualified person at their own expense and submit it for review by my Department's Ecology Unit.

Agriculture Scheme Appeals

839. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of an appeal for a digitised area of conservation by a person (details supplied); and if

he will make a statement on the matter. [5582/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The person named submitted a 2019 Basic Payment/Areas of Natural Constraints Schemes application on the 15th April 2019. EU Regulations governing the administration of these schemes require that full and comprehensive administrative checks including, in some cases, remote sensing (i.e. satellite) inspections, be completed before any payments issue.

The application of the person named was the subject of a Remote Sensing land eligibility inspection and was notified by letter on 14th October 2019 of the initial inspection findings, which identified an over-declaration in area. This letter afforded the person named the opportunity to submit comments on the inspection findings. An acknowledgment of the letter was received without comments on the 15th October 2019. A final letter issued on 17th October 2019, which again gave the person named the option of requesting a review of the final inspection outcome.

On the 24th April 2020, representations were made on behalf of the named person for a review request on a parcel that was affecting their GLAS payment. A review was completed and a letter detailing the outcome, which upheld the original inspection findings, issued to the person named on the 18th May 2020.

In the event that the person named is dissatisfied with the outcome of the review, the decision can be appealed to the independent Agriculture Appeals Office within 3 months.

Question No. 840 answered with Question No. 835.

Covid-19 Pandemic

841. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the implementation of the EU farm to fork strategy is being suspended for the duration of the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5634/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The Farm to Fork Strategy is currently under development by the EU Commission. The Strategy is scheduled for publication later this month.

Fishing Industry

842. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority will not sign health certificates for live crab to be shipped to China; and if this is due to Covid-19. [5664/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I am advised by the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) that it is continuing to issue health certificates for consignments of live crab and other seafood exports in line with official controls. Certification of export consignments of live crab to China and Hong Kong is provided where laboratory test results demonstrate compliance with the relevant standards for Cadmium, a naturally occurring heavy metal that can accumulate in certain parts of crabs.

The SFPA has statutory responsibility for seafood safety controls and the enforcement of seafood safety law. Any queries on the certification of seafood exports should be brought directly to the SFPA.

Beef Industry

843. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider an immediate meeting of the beef task force. [5824/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The last meeting of the Beef Taskforce took place on 9th January 2020. Members of the Taskforce recently received a written update on the ongoing work of the Taskforce. These documents are available on my Department's website: www.agriculture.gov.ie/farmingsectors/beef/beeftaskforce.

Taskforce members have been advised that a meeting of the Taskforce will be convened as soon as practical.

Brexit Negotiations

844. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps being taken to protect Irish agricultural and fishing interests during Brexit negotiations; and the status of discussions regarding a potential extension to the current deadline in order to facilitate an agreed trade agreement. [5830/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The agri-food sector has greatly increased the value of food and drink exports over the last number of years. In 2019 overall exports were €14.5 billion, and the UK remains our largest market, with exports of almost €5.5 billion. Therefore, our shared primary interest is to secure the best possible outcome from the EU-UK negotiations for the Irish agri-food and fisheries sectors, given both the disproportionate exposure of these sectors to the UK market, and the need to maintain existing reciprocal access to fishing waters and resources.

We have been very clear on our key 'asks' in the future relationship negotiations, which are:

- continued free access to the UK market, without tariffs and with minimal or no additional customs and administrative procedures;
- minimisation of the risk from UK trade agreements with third countries; and
- maintenance of existing reciprocal access and quota shares to fishing waters and resources.

The timelines are tight for these negotiations, even more so given the challenges currently posed by COVID-19. While there have been calls for an extension to the transition period, including from significant sectors in the UK, the UK Government response continues to be that the transition period will end on 31 December 2020, and that they will not seek an extension. I do not believe that it is helpful to speculate further on the matter at this juncture, other than to note, of course, that an extension is a matter for agreement by both parties in accordance with the timelines laid out.

We remain fully abreast of stakeholder concerns in these negotiations and I can assure the Deputy that my Department officials and I are continuing to work within a whole of Government effort to ensure the best possible outcome for the agri-food and fisheries sectors.

Common Agricultural Policy

845. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Ma-

rine the most recent developments on reform of the CAP; the progress on agreeing a new programme at EU level; and the progress made in obtaining agreement by all member states to reverse the proposed budget cuts to the next CAP. [5831/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Since their publication by the European Commission in June 2018, intensive discussions have taken place on the CAP reform proposals. While significant progress has been made, final agreement has not yet been reached. Before the new CAP can be implemented, it will be necessary to reach overall agreement within the Council, and then with the European Parliament and Commission. Neither the EU Council nor the Parliament have reached agreement on a partial general approach.

It seems clear at this stage that agreement will not be reached by the end of 2020 and that transitional regulations will be required. Both the Council and the Parliament have agreed on their position in relation to the transitional period and therefore trilogue discussions between the Council, the Parliament and the Croatian Presidency are expected to take place in June.

I have worked hard with my European counterparts, and with Commissioners Hogan and Wojciechowski, to build consensus around the need to maintain a strong CAP budget post-2020. However, I am aware that there are divergent views amongst Member States on the appropriate level for the budget. Some, including Ireland, have indicated their willingness to increase their national contributions, once they contribute towards areas of added European value, while others feel equally strongly that the current proposals would be too costly.

There is still some way to go before agreement can be achieved, but I can assure the Deputy that my Department and I will continue to ensure that protecting the CAP budget remains a key priority for Ireland in these negotiations.

Agreement on the next MFF is a matter for Heads of State and Government, and requires unanimity by all Member States at the European Council. The proposed budget must also be agreed by the European Parliament.

Basic Payment Scheme

846. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of applications to the 2020 basic payment scheme by county. [5834/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The information requested by the Deputy is set out in tabular form as follows.

County	Total
CARLOW	1,622
CAVAN	4,901
CLARE	6,113
CORK	12,981
DONEGAL	8,935
DUBLIN	638
GALWAY	12,169
KERRY	7,932
KILDARE	2,112
KILKENNY	3,353

County	Total
LAOIS	2,916
LEITRIM	3,463
LIMERICK	5,194
LONGFORD	2,444
LOUTH	1,508
MAYO	11,501
MEATH	3,871
MONAGHAN	4,184
OFFALY	3,006
ROSCOMMON	5,749
SLIGO	3,996
TIPPERARY	6,883
WATERFORD	2,422
WESTMEATH	3,023
WEXFORD	4,026
WICKLOW	2,156
AWAITING HERD NUMBER	1,908
Total	129,006

Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme

847. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of applications to the 2020 ANC scheme by county. [5835/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Please see the information requested by the Deputy in tabular form.

County	Total Number of Applications with ANC eligible land
Carlow	811
Cavan	4,682
Clare	5,911
Cork	7,547
Donegal	8,541
Dublin	159
Galway	11,705
Kerry	7,562
Kildare	620
Kilkenny	1,853
Laois	1,724
Leitrim	3,353
Limerick	4,442
Longford	2,341
Louth	822
Mayo	11,120

County	Total Number of Applications with ANC eligible land
Meath	1,501
Monaghan	3,941
Offaly	2,463
Roscommon	5,528
Sligo	3,838
Tipperary	4,764
Waterford	1,462
Westmeath	2,799
Wexford	1,539
Wicklow	1,857
Total	102,885

Beef Environmental Efficiency Scheme

848. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of applications to the BEEPS programme by the closing deadline by county in tabular form. [5836/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The figures in relation to applications received under the Beef Environmental Efficiency Pilot - Suckler (BEEP-S) are set out as follows.

County	Applications received
CARLOW	336
CAVAN	1,389
CLARE	2,195
CORK	1,803
DONEGAL	1,504
DUBLIN	63
GALWAY	3,002
KERRY	1,263
KILDARE	312
KILKENNY	636
LAOIS	632
LEITRIM	1,088
LIMERICK	771
LONGFORD	876
LOUTH	213
MAYO	2,647
MEATH	628
MONAGHAN	996
OFFALY	605
ROSCOMMON	1,721
SLIGO	1,077
TIPPERARY	1,113

County	Applications received
WATERFORD	309
WESTMEATH	891
WEXFORD	597
WICKLOW	405
Total	27,072

Covid-19 Tests

849. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the discussions he has had with his ministerial colleagues and the HSE to ensure immediate priority testing in meat and dairy processing plants to ensure the safety of workers and the continuation of food supply chains during the Covid-19 emergency. [5837/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): A national Outbreak Control team has been established by the HSE to deal with all issues relating to Covid 19 in meat plants. DAFM is represented on this committee and it is expected that recommendations, including any in relation to testing, will issue from this group in due course.

Any clusters of cases in individual meat plants, in common with clusters in other workplaces, are dealt with by local HSE-led outbreak control teams. To date, I am not aware of any issues of significance that have arisen in relation to dairy processing plants.

Fishing Industry

850. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of discussions with fishing representative bodies with regard to establishing a fishing cessation tie-up scheme for vessels to support the industry through market disruption caused by Covid-19; the amount of unused funds from the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund that could be allocated towards such a scheme; the details of other potential domestic sources in this regard; and the progress of talks with the European Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries to make additional EU funds available for such a scheme. [5838/20]

858. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of discussions with fishing representative bodies with regard to a storage aid market support measure to support the industry through market disruption caused by Covid-19; and the progress of talks with the European Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries to make additional European Maritime and Fisheries Fund funds available for such a measure. [5912/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I propose to take Questions Nos. 850 and 858 together.

Our fishing sector has been particularly hard hit by the severe market disruption in Europe and internationally caused by the Covid-19 Pandemic. The closure of many markets and disruption of established distribution channels, particularly to restaurants and the food service industry domestically and internationally, has seen market demand and sale prices drop very substantially in many of our key markets. However, there are still markets open, both domestically and internationally, and it is important that we continue to supply these markets to maintain food supply, service our established customers and be in a position to take advantage of increased demand as markets open up. That reopening of markets may commence now that some countries

are commencing a phased re-opening from lockdowns, but may take some months to return to a level of normality.

As part of the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative, the European Union has enacted a new Regulation 2020/560 amending the provisions of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (508/2014) to enable Member States to use their EMFF Operational Programmes to address the impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on their seafood sectors. Regrettably, no additional EU funds were made available to accompany the EU initiative. EMFF Programmes operate over the 2014-20 period and since the Pandemic has hit at a time when EMFF Programmes are coming to an end, Ireland like many other Member States has limited funds remaining. I continue to lobby Commissioner Sinkevicius to make additional EU funds available. However, it is important to note that any EMFF interventions to support our seafood sector during the Pandemic must be funded in the first instance through funds voted for 2020, and EU co-funding is only received retrospectively in 2021.

I have met with representatives of our fisheries and processing sectors on a number of occasions, most recently on 29 April, to hear their views on the impacts of the Pandemic and how the EMFF Programme may support them during this difficult period. Representation included the four fisheries producer organisations, the National Inshore Fisheries Forum, the fisheries cooperatives and the Irish Fish Processors and Exporters Association. There was a positive and constructive engagement, with a broad consensus from industry representatives that aid for temporary tie-up of fishing vessels should be the priority, enabling some vessels to tie-up, while others fished to meet market demands. There was little support for a storage aid scheme, with those in favour of it wanting it used only to subsidise the cost of cold storage of fish already in storage. Otherwise, fishing representatives feared that it would create an overhang on the markets and contribute to continued poor market prices when markets recover. Clearly, using scarce funds for a measure with little industry support, and one that would do nothing to support fishermen going forward, would be a poor use of resources.

Throughout my discussions with fishing representatives, I have emphasised to them the cross sectoral supports being made available by Government at very significant cost, including the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment, the Covid-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme, and the Future Growth Loan Scheme, Micro-Finance Ireland Covid-19 Business Loan, Credit Guarantee Scheme and Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme, made available through the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland. I have also highlighted to industry the loan holiday arrangements from the banking sector.

In line with the strong preference of fishing representatives, I announced on 8 May a Covid-19 Temporary Fleet Tie-up Scheme for fishing vessels in the Polyvalent, Beam Trawl and Specific segments of the fleet, to be implemented under Ireland's European Maritime and Fisheries Fund Operational Programme 2014-20. The Covid-19 Temporary Fleet Tie-up Scheme will be operational from 1 June and will be available to the inshore fleet and to larger vessels. It will allow vessel owners to voluntarily opt to tie up for a maximum of two months over the period June to August.

The Scheme will support the fixed costs incurred by the vessel owners and is designed to complement the Covid-19 wage supports and loan arrangements already being provided by Government to the fishing sector and indeed other sectors of our economy. The supports to fixed costs available under the Scheme are outlined in the table below and range from €6,000 per month for a maximum of two months for the very largest vessels over 24 metres, to €500 per month for a maximum of two months for the very smallest vessels under 6 metres in length.

Size of vessel	Payment over 1-month tie-up period	Payment over 2-month tie-up period
> 24m	€6,000	€12,000
18 < 24m	€4,600	€9,200
15 < 18m	€2,000	€4,000
12 < 15m	€1,900	€3,800
10 < 12m	€800	€1,600
8 < 10m	€750	€1,500
6 < 8m	€500	€1,000
< 6m	€500	€1,000

In order to underpin the Government's policy of ensuring that the food chain is maintained and to maintain an essential presence in our markets, the Scheme will be available to a maximum of 66% of the fishing fleet, in the different size categories, in any one month. Any vessel not receiving support to tie-up in any particular month may continue to fish.

In order to limit the benefits of the Scheme to active vessels, an applicant vessel must have carried out fishing activities at sea for at least 120 days over the 2-year period 2018/19 and have made total first sales of fish to a minimum value of €5,000 in the calendar year 2019, by reference to the Irish Sales Note System administered by the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority.

European Council Meetings

851. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the outcome of the 13 May 2020 EU Agriculture Council of Ministers meeting regarding Covid-19 supports to farmers and the agrifood sector including the use of CAP market disturbance aid and exceptional aid; the status of discussions with the Commission in this regard; and the proposals Ireland and like-minded countries made at the meeting. [5839/20]

852. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the outcome of the 13 May 2020 EU Agriculture Council of Ministers meeting regarding CAP reform post 2020; the latest discussions with the Commission in this regard; the status of the EU Commission farm to fork and biodiversity strategies which will be published soon; the proposals Ireland and like-minded countries made at the meeting regarding these strategies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5840/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I propose to take Questions Nos. 851 and 852 together.

On the 13 May, I attended a video-conference meeting of EU Agriculture Ministers with Agriculture Commissioner, Janusz Wojciechowski, and Fisheries Commissioner, Virginijus Sinkevicius, to discuss the effectiveness of measures introduced by the Commission to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on agriculture and fisheries.

I welcome these measures, which include, inter alia private storage aid in the dairy and meat sectors which were a response to an Irish initiative. However, I also reiterated my ongoing concerns regarding the depth and potential duration of the crisis, and made it clear that these actions can only be the first step. In particular, I called for additional funding to be made available in the form of exceptional aid for livestock producers.

I also called for the CAP post-2020 budget to be fully restored in the next Multiannual Financial Framework. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the important role farm-

ers play in putting food on European tables. They are also expected to contribute to achieving higher levels of climate ambition post-2020, and so we must ensure that we have a CAP budget that is fit for purpose.

Horticulture Sector

853. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when his attention was first drawn to the fact that a company (details supplied) was bringing workers into Ireland; the actions taken as a result of this development at departmental level in view of Covid-19 with respect to public health advice; and the number of meetings and conference calls he held with his ministerial colleagues in this regard. [5841/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The sourcing of labour by employers in the agri-food sector is a matter for those employers themselves.

It is estimated that 6,600 are employed in the Horticulture industry, while a further 11,000 are employed in downstream businesses, with a small percentage of this total employment being seasonal labour. Sources of seasonal labour are multifaceted. Employers generally focus on their historical sources of labour both from the domestic labour market but also eastern Europe (Balkan and Baltic regions) which provides a valuable source of experience, skilled people from an agrarian background well prepared for the role.

In response to the Covid-19 situation, my Department has been working closely with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to ensure employers are aware of the supports for business to help them source labour from the domestic economy. A national recruitment campaign by my colleague, Regina Doherty, Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection has commenced with the aim of recruiting temporary workers for the Horticulture sector from the live register within Ireland. This campaign will focus on the Fruit harvest peaking in mid-May to mid-June and the Vegetable harvest from mid-June.

Advice and guidance on travel requirements into the country is made fully available to prospective visitors on the official Government website, and is updated regularly.

Trade Agreements

854. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if an impact analysis has been performed on the EU-Mexico trade deal signed on 28 April 2020, specifically with respect to the Irish beef sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5888/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I welcome the conclusion of negotiations on the modernisation of the EU-Mexico Global Agreement, as it provides for significant access to the Mexican market for EU agri-food products, particularly in the dairy, pigmeat and poultry sectors. It also provides full protection for 99% of European Union Geographical Indications.

This agreement was included in the Free Trade Agreements study commissioned by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, and carried out by Copenhagen Economics in 2018. The results indicated a minimal level of impact to the Irish beef sector with regard to any Mexican beef exports to trading partners.

Beef Industry

855. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will change the clause in the BEAM scheme instructing farmers to reduce their stock by 5% due to the difficulty in selling and the low price of stock; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5893/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The objective of the Beef Exceptional Aid Measure (BEAM) was 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. This aid was granted to provide temporary market adjustment support in response to a specific market disturbance as outlined in Ireland's notification to the EU Commission and the 5% reduction was part of the conditionality sought by the EU.

Approved BEAM participants have given a commitment to reduce the production of bovine livestock manure nitrogen on the holding by 5% for the period 01 July 2020 to 30 June 2021 as compared with the period 01 July 2018 to 30 June 2019 as recorded on Department systems. Given that this requirement only begins next July and is reviewed across the duration of a year, it would be premature to be considering amendments at this time.

Participants who need advice on how to manage this reduction can contact the Department or consult an agricultural advisor to work out which changes will make most sense on their farm.

Felling Licences

856. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a decision will be issued on a felling licence application submitted in May 2018 by a person (details supplied) in County Galway; the reason for the delay in making a decision in relation to the application despite assertions made by them that they expected the new procedures being put in place early in the year to process such applications would impact positively on the current backlog; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5898/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The Deputy will be aware that my Department has made changes to internal Appropriate Assessment Procedures (AAP), which has resulted in delays to some files. These changes to the AAP were required following important Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) decisions and their subsequent interpretation by the Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC) and others. All forestry licences issued by the Department undergo a legal consent process.

The Habitats Directive (Article 6.3) requires that where a plan or project is likely to have a significant effect on a Natura site, either individually or in-combination with other plans or projects, it must undergo an appropriate assessment of its implications for that Natura site.

The felling licence application, for the person named, is within the Maumturk Mountains SAC and upstream from Lough Corrib SAC. At this stage, potential adverse impacts of the proposed clear fell operations on the Qualifying Interests of the SACs cannot be ruled out and, therefore, a Natura Impact Statement (NIS) will be required.

A request for the NIS will now be sent to the person named. On receipt of a NIS from a suitably qualified person, further assessment of the application will take place.

GLAS Issues

857. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when repayments due under the GLAS scheme will issue to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5900/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The person named was approved into GLAS 1 with a contract commencement date of 1 October 2015.

In this case, the applicant successfully appealed his rejection from the scheme. The GLAS application has been reinstated and payment has issued for scheme years 2018 and 2019.

Balancing payments are due in respect of monies recouped by the Department for scheme years 2015 – 2017. It is expected these payments will be processed shortly.

A GLAS official has been in direct contact with the person named in relation to the position as outlined above.

Question No. 858 answered with Question No. 850.

Food Exports

859. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps being taken to ensure Irish fish and seafood product is able to reach continental EU markets despite reports (details supplied) that some wholesalers and retailers in France are being pressured not to stock product from non-domestic sources; and if he has made representations to his French counterparts and the European Commission to ensure the proper functioning of the single market and that Irish product is not being barred from access to markets. [5913/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I am very aware of the adverse impacts the COVID-19 Pandemic on our fishing industry, particularly with regard to the disruption of our traditional markets in Europe and Asia. Ireland's top five export partners for seafood are France, the UK, Spain, Italy and China - all of whom have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. While trade to China has begun to reopen and there is demand from the Spanish market in particular and to a much lower degree from the French market, it is clear that this is far below normal levels and the market situation overall remains challenging.

It has been brought to my attention that there are reports circulating that some wholesalers and retailers in France are being pressured not to stock product from non-domestic sources. The Irish Embassy in Paris is aware of these concerns and continues to monitor this situation closely. It is important to note that the closure of the French Food service sector, due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, has greatly reduced demand for fish in France. It is expected that the easing of some of the French COVID-19 measures from 11 May will lead to the phased re-opening of the food sector in France but it is still unclear as to when restaurants will reopen for business.

On a more general note, I have stressed the importance of maintaining the Single Market to the EU Commissioners for Agriculture and Fisheries and to my counterparts in other Member States.

Of course, there is a small minority who have called for action that would subvert the single market. I am sure the Deputy would agree that any such action would be very much against the best interests of Irish farmers and fishers.

Seafood Sector

860. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the outcome of the 13 May 2020 EU Agriculture and Fisheries Council meeting regarding Covid-19 supports to fishermen and the seafood sector including additional funding from the European maritime and fisheries fund; the status of discussions with the Commission in this regard; and the proposals Ireland and like-minded countries made at the meeting. [5914/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): On 13 May, I met with fellow Fisheries Ministers by video conference to exchange views and discuss measures to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our fisheries sectors. This was the second video conference of Agriculture and Fisheries Ministers to take place since the start of the pandemic.

In relation to fisheries, I noted that overall activity by the Irish fishing fleet is significantly reduced, particularly for smaller vessels, and that the market situation remains challenging. I called on the Commission to keep the needs of the sector under ongoing review.

I made clear the need for an ongoing, coordinated and effective response to COVID-19 at European level in order to effectively mitigate the impacts of the crisis on the agri-food and fisheries sectors. I expect the Commission to reflect carefully on the Council discussions, and I look forward to seeing further proposals that will ensure a robust and timely response to the difficulties that look set to continue to affect the agric- food and fisheries sectors over the medium term.

In relation to fisheries, other Member States shared their issues and concerns about the markets. Some Member States expressed concern that their available EMFF funding was substantially committed and made clear that, without additional financial resources, they would have difficulty adequately supporting their sectors. Together, we stressed that the Commission should explore all available options. As a practical measure, I asked the Commissioner to increase the allowed level of uncaught quota that may be carried over to 2021 for certain stocks in line with scientific advice.

I announced a temporary voluntary fleet tie-up scheme for fishing vessels in the Polyvalent, Beam Trawl and Specific segments of the fishing fleet which is now open for applications. Eligible vessels will be supported to voluntarily opt to tie up for one or two of the next three months, operational from 1 June 2020 and availability will be extended to the inshore fleet and to larger vessels. The Scheme will be implemented under Ireland's European Maritime and Fisheries Fund Operational Programme 2014-20, co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union.

This new Covid-19 Voluntary Fleet Tie-up Scheme will support the fixed costs incurred by owners of fishing vessels while tied-up. The Scheme is designed to complement the Covid-19 wage supports and loan arrangements already being provided by Government to the fishing sector and indeed other sectors of our economy.

There are still markets open both domestically and internationally and it is important that we continue to supply these markets to maintain food supply, service our established customers and be in a position to take advantage of increased demand as markets open up. To that extent, we want to see a continuing level of fishing by our fishing fleet. However, to temporarily facilitate the industry to better match fishing activity with market demand, I introduced this temporary scheme to support a portion of our fleet who voluntarily choose to tie up, while others continue fishing.

Covid-19 Pandemic

861. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a submission submitted by an organisation (details supplied) has been considered; if in particular, riding schools can reopen in either phase 1 or 2 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business in view of the fact that social distancing rules can be adhered to and that it is an outdoor activity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5931/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The submission referred to was made by Horse Sport Ireland, the centralised national body for the sport horse industry and is a submission for the industry in general and outlines the protocols and procedures that can be put in place towards an incremental resumption of equestrian activity, when current Covid-19 restrictions are lifted.

On 3 May, the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business was published by Government. This plan for lifting Covid-19 restrictions has been drawn up in conjunction with a range of Departments and stakeholders including the NPHE. It is informed and guided by a public health assessment of risk and is fair and proportionate with a view to effectively suppressing the spread of COVID-19 disease while enabling the gradual return of social and economic activity.

All businesses considering re-opening should ensure that they comply with the Return to Work Safely Protocol issued by the Government.

Agriculture Schemes

862. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of discussions at EU level to bring forward earlier payment for direct payments to farmers due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5934/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Given the current challenges relating to COVID 19, I am very aware of the importance of the financial support provided under the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) for farmers. The deadline for submission of BPS applications was Friday 15 May, and I am happy to confirm that the expected number of applications was received by this deadline.

My Department is now preparing as a matter of priority for the processing of these applications for payment. Officials have also been engaging with the EU Commission to explore the possibility of flexibilities in relation to the payment of EU-funded support schemes such as the BPS, including the proposal to make advance payments under the BPS before the schedule of inspections required under EU legislation is completed. It has also been agreed at EU level to implement the higher BPS advance payment rate of 70% this year.

At present, under EU rules, the Basic Payment scheme payment can be made from 16 October. However, my Department will continue to engage at EU level to ensure that flexibilities are in place which accommodate the most efficient method of delivering payments to farmers in what is a very challenging situation for them.

Covid-19 Pandemic

863. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if work on new farms is considered essential during the Covid-19 lockdown, specifically work on

buildings which have been disused for a number of years; if so, the measures in place for residents to engage with the planning process in view of the restrictions in place due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5984/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): My Department's website has a FAQ section on Covid 19 with information in relation to on-farm construction activities. In all cases, plans should be in place for all essential workers to carry out their work while observing a 2 metre physical distancing and all other relevant HSE advice.

The delivery of concrete for essential minor works on farms (such as the pouring of concrete for silage pits) is permitted, as this is part of the essential business of farming at this time of year. In accordance with the Public Health advice, these services should be for essential works only. Full details are available at; DAFM - FAQs about the 'Stay at Home' phase.

It is the responsibility of all businesses to ensure that they comply with all the Government measures currently in place during the Covid 19 crisis.

Poultry Industry

864. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of poultry farms affected by avian flu to date in 2020; his plans to provide compensation to those farmers affected; the further supports his Department will provide those farmers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6011/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): To date this year, twelve poultry flocks have been affected by low pathogenic Avian Influenza. I am acutely aware of the difficulties currently being faced by the affected poultry producers in this instance. I wish to assure you that my Department has been and will continue to engage with representatives of the poultry sector, to seek to ensure that the recent outbreak of low-pathogenic avian influenza is dealt with in a timely and effective manner.

With regard the development of a support scheme for impacted poultry producers, there is no legal basis for a mandatory compensation scheme under EU legislation in respect of the particular subtype of the disease identified in this case. However, my Department is exploring the potential to partially offset the costs of depopulation and rendering for those poultry farmers affected during the recent outbreak. Any such aid would be subject to the normal State Aid rules.

Farm Household Incomes

865. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on the findings of the analysis carried out by a person (details supplied) that shows that farm incomes could collectively fall by between €590 million and €990 million; his plans to support those farmers affected by such losses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6012/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I am aware of the report referenced by the Deputy.

My Department works closely with Teagasc on monitoring family farm incomes. I understand that Teagasc will shortly publish analysis of a range of scenarios examining in detail the possible income effects arising from the current COVID pandemic.

The agri-food sector is an essential part of the economic and social fabric of Ireland, especially in rural and coastal areas, and I am acutely aware of the issues presented to the agri-food sector in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. My Department and I are working to ensure that business and services to farmers can continue, keeping food and other processing facilities operational, ensuring that payments and commercial activities that are necessary to protect farm incomes can continue.

There are likely to be significant economic impacts for the agri-food sector, arising from reduced demand in key markets around the world. The loss of high value food service customers is already of significant immediate concern.

The response to the economic impacts on the sector should include a strong, shared EU response, using the instruments available in the Common Agricultural Policy. I have already highlighted to Commissioner Wojciechowski the serious consequences for farmers and the food industry and the need to ensure that the full range of market supports available under the Common Market Organisation Regulation are made available. These supports include Aids to Private Storage and Exceptional Aid measures, flexibilities when it comes to on-farm inspections and early payment of the Basic Payment Scheme.

Following Ireland's efforts in leading an agreed EU-27 statement on the need for further supports, the Commission have introduced Aids to Private Storage for Dairy (MP, Butter, Cheese), Beef and Sheepmeat. Private Storage Aid (PSA) is a risk management tool / safety net available to EU producers of certain agricultural products under the CMO regulation (1308/2013). The aim is to facilitate producers to store the product for a stipulated temporary storage period.

I am also working with my colleagues in Government to ensure that all businesses, including those in the agri-food sector, get access to suitable supports, and the measures in place are being kept under review.

Working with my colleague Minister Humphreys, I have ensured that 40% of the €250 million COVID-19 Working Capital Scheme will be available for food businesses. Similarly, 40% of an additional €200 million tranche of the Future Growth Loan Scheme will be ring fenced to provide long-term investment support for primary producers and food businesses. I continue to liaise with the banks on liquidity for the primary sector, and also want to highlight the availability of working capital assistance to farmers and fishers through Microfinance Ireland's COVID-19 Business Loan. We will continue to keep the finance needs of the whole agri-food sector under review.

I have already provided an additional €20m in supports for the beef sector in Budget 2020, on top of the €20 million provided last year for the BEEP pilot. This year's scheme – the Beef Environmental Efficiency Programme (Sucklers) is a straightforward scheme, which can deliver a significant cash-flow injection, and I am pleased to announce that over 27,000 farmers applied by the closing date of 15/05/20.

Conscious of the cash flow pressures on farms at present, I have brought forward €26m in GLAS payments by a month, and these funds were paid recently. Balancing payments to participants in the Organic Farming Scheme have also been brought forward. I have also increased funding in my Department's Calf Welfare Investment Scheme from €1.5 million to €4 million, to assist farmers with extra calves. A range of practical flexibilities have been introduced in departmental schemes, including, for example, the extension of completion deadlines for TAMS by 3 months, and the submission for Nitrates records to the end of June. My Department has also worked to ensure that the supply chain continues to function. Critical state services in dairy and meat processing plants continue to function so that farmers have an outlet for their produce, a protocol has been developed for the continued operation of marts, albeit on a limited basis,

and the critical certification and other services required to support exports of live animals and products continue to operate.

My Department and agencies will continue to monitor the impacts on the agri-food sector as the situation evolves, and to provide appropriate supports to the sector. Senior officials from my Department remain in constant contact with stakeholders right across the sector to share information on emerging issues and contingency planning, and we will continue to develop appropriate supports as the situation evolves.

Beef Industry

866. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to ease the requirements within the BEAM scheme in view of the challenges presented by the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6013/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The objective of the Beef Exceptional Aid Measure (BEAM) was 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. This aid was granted to provide temporary market adjustment support in response to a specific market disturbance as outlined in Ireland's notification to the EU Commission and the 5% reduction was part of the conditionality sought by the EU.

Approved BEAM participants have given a commitment to reduce the production of bovine livestock manure nitrogen on the holding by 5% for the period 01 July 2020 to 30 June 2021 as compared with the period 01 July 2018 to 30 June 2019 as recorded on Department systems. Given that this requirement only begins next July and is reviewed across the duration of a year, it would be premature to be considering amendments at this time.

Participants who need advice on how to manage this reduction can contact the Department or consult an agricultural advisor to work out which changes will make most sense on their farm.

Meat Processing Plants

867. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of workers in meat plants that have been tested for Covid-19 by centre; the number within each plant that have tested positive; if his Department has provided PPE to meat plants; if so, if meat factories will be asked to repay the cost of same; if he is satisfied that meat factories have been sufficiently proactive in protecting their workers during this period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6014/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Information with regard to the numbers of workers tested or positive in meat plants is a matter for the Food Businesses and the Health Service Executive.

My Department supplies PPE to its own staff and contractors in Food Business premises. It does not supply PPE to Food Business personnel. Food business have put in place a range of protective practices and equipment to protect employee safety and these include measures such as the reduction of throughput rates at the plant, temperature checks on entry into the plant, the extension of operating hours and other safeguards such as "podding", the provision of ad-

ditional PPE, the use of perspex screens and the provision of additional facilities to support physical distancing measures.

A national Outbreak Control team has been established by the HSE to deal with all issues relating to Covid 19 in meat plants. My Department is represented on this committee and it is expected that recommendations, including any in relation to testing, will issue from this group in due course. Any clusters of cases in individual meat plants, in common with clusters in other workplaces, are dealt with by local HSE-led outbreak control teams.

In relation to measures taken to maintain social distancing within the meat plant environment, my Department staff and its contractors are following HSE Guidelines in relation to social distancing.

Beef Industry

868. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the proportion of beef both in quantity of cattle, tonnes of meat and percentage of both that is produced by feed lot; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6015/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): As part of the TB eradication programme, beef finishing herds, if they meet the necessary criteria, are allowed to avail of a special status, termed “Controlled Finishing Unit”. When a herd meets the criteria to be regarded as a ‘Controlled Finishing Unit’ under the TB Eradication Programme, the herd is restricted under the TB Regulations and a special official supervisory and testing protocol is established. Such herds are not exempted from testing, reactor removal or disinfection requirements.

Restricted Controlled Finishing Units are TB tested at least once a year. This Controlled Finishing Unit status arrangement allows the delivery of an effective level of disease risk management while controlling the risk of further disease spread in compliance with animal health legislation, and enabling business continuity in this particular type of enterprise through the inward movement of cattle. Cattle from Controlled Finishing Unit herds restricted under the TB Eradication programme are only permitted to move to a EU approved slaughter plant.

Data is published on a monthly basis on my Department’s website which shows the number of cattle slaughtered from Controlled Finishing Units at approved beef exporting plants and this information can be found at

<https://www.agriculture.gov.ie/animalhealthwelfare/animalidentificationmovement/cattle/bovinebirthandmovementsmonthlyreports/>

Departmental Bodies

869. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the dates of forthcoming meetings of the beef taskforce; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6016/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The last meeting of the beef Taskforce was on 9th Jan 2020. Taskforce members have recently been provided with a written update on the work of the Taskforce. These documents are published on the Department’s website *www.agriculture.gov.ie/farmingsectors/beef/beeftaskforce*. As previously advised to members, a meeting of the Taskforce will be convened as soon as is practical.

Sheepmeat Sector

870. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he has commissioned an analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on sheep wool markets, the financial impact this will have on the farmers affected and the domestic economy; his plans to provide financial supports to those affected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6017/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): As the Deputy will be aware, my Department is monitoring the economic impact of the Covid19 pandemic on all aspects of the agriculture sector. To date, no specific analysis has been carried out on its impact on the wool sector.

Animal Diseases

871. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to respond to the European Commission decision to reduce funding for the tuberculosis eradication programme here by €975,000; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6018/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The EU provides co-funding to Ireland in respect of its annual bovine TB Programme in line with EU Regulation 652/2014. The Commission can reduce funding in certain circumstances, which include where clear progress demonstrated by prescribed metrics (herd incidence and herd prevalence) are not consistent with the goal of bovine TB eradication. Prior to 2019, Ireland had not been subject to any funding reductions. However, in mid-2019, following assessment of the results of Ireland's 2018 bovine TB Programme, the Commission notified Ireland of its intention to reduce 2018 Programme funding by 10%, or €975,000.

The Department has engaged extensively with the EU Commission on the matter. While acknowledging that there had been a significantly improved TB situation in Ireland over the past decade, the situation has deteriorated to some extent in 2018 and 2019. Continuing cooperation between farmers, farm organisations, Private Veterinary Practitioners and the Department will be required to reduce disease spread and more effectively target the high-risk factors associated with bTB transmission, in order to bring disease trends back on a downward trajectory.

Farms Data

872. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of farms by county that have been affected by botulism to date in 2020; the supports provided to the farms affected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6019/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Botulism in cattle is not a notifiable disease. However, it is of benefit that farmers may report suspected cases to my Department in order that the incidence and extent of outbreaks can be monitored. DAFM veterinary laboratories are available to assist in diagnosis and to rule out other diseases which can present in a similar manner to botulism. Suspect cases may be reported by the herd owner's private veterinary practitioner, to the Regional Veterinary Laboratory or the nearest Regional Veterinary Office (RVO).

As the disease is non-notifiable, I am not in a position to provide the Deputy with a definitive number of farms affected in 2020. However, one case has been reported to my Department.

Where a case of botulism is notified to my Department, an investigative procedure is initiated involving veterinary personnel who carry out a thorough examination in an effort to trace the origin of the outbreak. Procedures are put in place to mitigate and prevent further outbreaks and follow up inspections are carried out to ensure that the required controls are being implemented.

GLAS Issues

873. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to provide funding for those farmers with designated land in view of the important environmental protection work undertaken by those farmers and the costs associated with same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6020/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I should clarify for the Deputy that my Department has no role in the designation of lands. This is a function managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. Therefore, the question of compensation does not arise in the context of any schemes or measures introduced by my Department and any issues arising should be directed to my colleague with responsibility for that Department, Minister Madigan.

Many of these designations are for species or habitats where conservation is also encouraged under various schemes operated by my Department. The GLAS scheme, for example, is Ireland's main agri-environment scheme with close to 50,000 participant farmers. While GLAS is a voluntary scheme, applicants with Commonage or Farmland Habitat on designated land were obligated to include these lands in their application. GLAS participants receive payments for the management of these actions over the five year term of their contract.

Similarly, some of the EIP/locally-led schemes are also for species or habitats designated such as the €25m hen harrier scheme or the €10m freshwater pearl mussel scheme. These actions and schemes are a vital part of Ireland's overall environmental obligations and recognise the contribution which farmers can make to achieving these.

All of these schemes are part of our current Rural Development Programme which is currently closed to new schemes and entrants as the funds are fully committed. Negotiations are underway at EU level on transitional measures and schemes for 2021 and possibly longer, pending finalisation of the next CAP programme. My Department is already engaged in detailed stakeholder consultation on these issues and on shaping the schemes under the next Programme.

Farmers Markets

874. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to introduce incentives towards the development of farmers markets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6021/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I am pleased that farmers' markets, along with other outdoor shops, were allowed to re-open in Phase 1 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business from Monday 18th May, so long as measures can be put in place to ensure that the necessary social distancing is adhered to carefully.

I recognise that this has been a very challenging time for suppliers to farmers' markets. I am aware that Bord Bia have provided additional marketing supports and advice for small food

producers, particularly in terms of converting to digital marketing and sales. Bord Bia hosted a very informative webinar for producers who sell at Farmers Markets, to explore other opportunities to reach their consumers, as well as ensuring they are best prepared to go back to market as they re-open. The webinar is available on the Bord Bia website at: <https://www.bordbia.ie/industry/covid-19/covid-webinars/previous-webinars/>

Small producers are encouraged to engage directly with Bord Bia as it continues to develop specific supports for small food businesses impacted by Covid19. They should also engage with their Local Enterprise Office.

In terms of supports for the markets themselves, funding may be available through the LEADER Programme, administered by the Department of Community and Rural Development, depending on the nature of the proposed activity to be funded.

Organic Farming Scheme

875. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of an organic farming scheme inspection commenced in December 2019 for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6022/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The person named above was selected for an Inspection in respect of the 2019 Organic Farming Scheme payment year. This inspection has now been finalised and a letter informing the person named of the outcome of the inspection has issued.

Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme

876. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if an ANC payment for 2019 will be processed for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6082/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): In order to participate in the Areas of Natural Constraints (ANC) scheme, an individual must apply for the Scheme by ticking the appropriate box when submitting their application for the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) online.

Where an applicant had received payment under the ANC scheme in 2018, but did not tick to apply for the scheme when making their 2019 application, they were presented during the application process with a screen message to advise that they had received ANC payment in 2018 but had not ticked the box to apply in 2019. This message required the applicant to explicitly choose whether they wished to apply or not for the ANC Scheme. The online system required this confirmation to be completed before continuing with the submission of the BPS application.

As the person named had received payment in the previous year, they would have received this message when submitting their BPS application online. Thus, the person named chose not to apply for the 2019 ANC Scheme as part of the BPS application process. The BPS application was submitted on 5 May 2019.

The person named subsequently contacted the ANC section in writing on 11 December 2019 stating that they had failed to tick the box to apply for the ANC Scheme.

Correspondence has issued to the person named confirming that, as they did not apply for the scheme when submitting their BPS application, no ANC application could be processed. No evidence was submitted to support the acceptance of an application on force majeure grounds.

The person named was advised in the correspondence that should they wish to appeal the decision of my Department they may do so in writing to the Agriculture Appeals Office. My Department is aware that an appeal has been submitted by the named individual to the Agriculture Appeals Office and that the appeal is currently being processed by that office.

Agriculture Schemes

877. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if entitlement allocation rights in respect of farmers (details supplied) in County Kerry will be reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6085/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Officials in my Department have reviewed the case in question and have confirmed that the allocation of entitlements was calculated correctly. The person named established an allocation right of 211.19 payment entitlements at start of the current CAP programme in 2015. This allocation was based on the lower area of land declared by the above named in 2013 and 2015 and the value of the payment amount in 2014.

In this instance, Department staff have also been in contact with the Deputy to explain in further detail the case in question.

Animal Welfare

878. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider widening the essential job list to include animal groomers to work by appointment only for cases in which the animals welfare would suffer if ungroomed (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6164/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The current list of essential services includes the provision of veterinary, animal welfare and related services. Where there is a clear and immediate welfare issue associated with an individual dog which needs to be groomed/clipped, this may be dealt with on animal welfare grounds whilst adhering to an operational protocol that is in compliance with the HSE advice regarding hand and respiratory hygiene and physical distancing and where engagement by appointment would be important factor. In the provision of essential services, providers should always consider whether such a service is actually essential at any point in time and how it can be undertaken such that it poses minimal risk of the provider and client.

The Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business further sets out the sequence by which businesses may incrementally reopen. This Roadmap is guided by over-riding principles and a focus – safe, rational, evidence-informed, fair, open and transparent and whole of society. The roadmap for Retail, Personal Services and Commercial activities are set out in Table 5. In addition businesses that are preparing to return to work in accord with the Roadmap, should proceed in line with the guidance set out in the Return to Work Safely Protocol.

Tuberculosis Eradication Programme

879. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of bovines on farms here tested for tuberculosis using the skin test in each of the years 2015 to 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6175/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The following table shows the number of skin tests performed on bovines animals for the years 2015 to 2019:

Year	Number of skin tests
2019	8,827,682
2018	8,869,856
2017	8,882,933
2016	8,635,824
2015	8,429,602

Since some animals are tested more than once per year due to being in high risk herds or moving between herds, the total number of tests annually exceeds the total number of cattle in the country for a given year.

Tuberculosis Eradication Programme

880. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of bovines that failed a tuberculosis skin test but showed no lesions post-mortem in each of the years 2015 to 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6176/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The table below shows the number of bovines that failed a tuberculosis skin test but showed no lesions post-mortem in each of the years 2015 to 2019.

Year	Skin reactors with no visible lesions
2019	8,570
2018	11,777
2017	10,787
2016	10,356
2015	9,169

Tuberculosis Eradication Programme

881. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of bovines that failed an on-farm tuberculosis skin test but passed a tuberculosis blood test in each of the years 2015 to 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6177/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The gamma interferon blood test being used is part of the quality control of TB testing and has a correlation rate of approximately 65% with skin testing, meaning that on average around 65% of skin test reactor animals will test positive on the quality control gamma interferon test. If this correlation level is not achieved, the Veterinary Inspector managing the case investigates the matter further.

My Department ensures that on-farm TB testing of cattle by Veterinary Practitioners is carried out to the highest standards. The quality control system has a number of different strands - potency testing of tuberculin batches, testing equipment maintenance requirements, audits on

labs and maintenance providers, analysis of testing data for each testing veterinary practitioner, inspections of veterinary practitioners testing, examination of reactors and blood testing of reactors.

Tuberculosis Eradication Programme

882. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of bovines that passed an on-farm tuberculosis skin test but on inspection subsequent to slaughter killed out with lesions in the year of their final tuberculosis test; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6178/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The following table shows the number of bovines that passed a TB skin test and which were subsequently sent for routine slaughter at which they were found to have lesions which were confirmed to be bovine TB following laboratory analysis, in the years 2015 to 2019:

Year	Animals with clear TB skin test with subsequent TB lesions
2019	1,654
2018	1,612
2017	1,552
2016	1,311
2015	1,550

Agriculture Schemes

883. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the overclaim assessed against a farmer (details supplied) in County Galway; the penalty imposed by scheme and scheme years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6180/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): My Department reviews all agricultural land parcels in the country on a rolling basis with the whole country reviewed over a three-year period. Imagery is reviewed and any ineligible features identified within a land parcel are removed. The area of the parcel is reduced and, if appropriate, any overpayment is addressed. Applicants are notified accordingly and are given the option to seek a review of any overclaims arising from this process.

In this regard, land parcels submitted under the 2018 Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) by the person named were subject to the process outlined above. Following the imagery review, the Maximum Eligible Area (MEA) of 19 land parcels were reduced which created overclaims on the parcels.

A letter issued to the person named on 9 July 2019 outlining the position and the options available to him. These overclaims resulted in a reduction of his 2018 BPS payment and an overpayment of €896.63 was applied. The person named replied on 20 December 2019 stating that he did not agree with the reduced MEA applied to all 19 parcels.

A review was carried out taking into account the particular landscape of the area and is now completed. The review made adjustments to the MEAs of the parcels but overclaims still exist for him under his 2018 BPS. However, the adjustments made to the MEAs reduced the overall level of overclaim applied to his case and a refund of €415.57 issued to the person named on

13 March 2020.

The 2019 Basic Payment Scheme/Areas of Natural Constraints Scheme application of the person named was selected for a Ground Eligibility inspection. This inspection identified an over-declaration in area amounting to 0.48ha. The person named was notified of the outcome of the original inspection on 28th November 2019 and chose not to submit any comments on the inspection findings. The inspection was finalised and a Final Notice letter issued on 13th December 2019. My Department has no record of a request for a review of the inspection findings being submitted by the person named.

This over-declaration in area resulted in the application of a reduction/penalty totalling €132.02 under the 2019 Basic Payment Scheme.

Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme

884. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider further extending the completion deadline for TAMS projects. [6185/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): My Department introduced changes to the TAMS II scheme deadlines on 1 April 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Flexibility was provided on completion deadlines with a 3 month extension on all projects due to completed (or approvals due to expire) between 1 March and 1 July.

As this is a constantly evolving situation, my Department is monitoring the situation closely and will implement further changes if and when they are needed.

Meat Processing Plants

885. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if plans will be put in place to test all workers in meat plants each day for Covid-19. [6186/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): A national Outbreak Control team has been established by the HSE to deal with all issues relating to Covid 19 in meat plants. My Department is represented on this committee and it is expected that recommendations, including any in relation to testing, will issue from this group in due course.

Any clusters of cases in individual meat plants, in common with clusters in other workplaces, are dealt with by local HSE-led outbreak control teams.

Meat Processing Plants

886. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the plans being put in place to provide workers in meat plants with full PPE equipment. [6187/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): My Department supplies PPE to its own staff and contractors in Food Business premises. It does not supply PPE to Food Business personnel. Food business have put in place a range of protective practices and equipment to protect employee safety and these include measures such as the reduction of throughput rates at the plant, temperature checks on entry into the plant, the extension of operating hours and other safeguards such as “podding”, the provision of additional

PPE, the use of perspex screens and the provision of additional facilities to support physical distancing measures.

A national Outbreak Control team has been established by the HSE to deal with all issues relating to Covid 19 in meat plants. My Department is represented on this committee and it is expected that recommendations, including any in relation to testing, will issue from this group in due course. Any clusters of cases in individual meat plants, in common with clusters in other workplaces, are dealt with by local HSE-led outbreak control teams.

Meat Processing Plants

887. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the HIQA will carry out inspections of all meat plants here. [6188/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): A National Outbreak Control Team has been established, chaired by the HSE, to co-ordinate the response to COVID 19 outbreaks in meat plants in Ireland. My Department is represented on that Committee. I expect that policy in relation to all aspects of dealing with Covid 19 outbreaks in meat factories will be guided by the output from this Committee. I am not aware at this time of any plans for HIQA to carry out inspections of meat plants here.

Organic Farming Scheme

888. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider reopening the organic farming scheme. [6189/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Under Ireland's current Rural Development Plan (2014 -2020) the amount of land under organic production has seen an increase of nearly 50% to nearly 74,000 hectares. A budget of €56m was allocated to fund the Organic Farming Schemes opened during the period 2014 to 2020 which was the largest allocation ever to an Organics support scheme. This allocation of funds is now fully consumed.

The Organic Farming Scheme was re-opened on a targeted basis last year to new farms wishing to convert. However, as the scheme is part of our overall Rural Development Programme (RDP) and as our RDP funds are fully committed to the end of the programme, funding is not available for a further re-opening of the scheme.

The consultation process on the next RDP as part of the next CAP is already underway and I would welcome stakeholder views on this and the shape of any future Organic Farming Scheme.

Tuberculosis Eradication Programme

889. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the availability of grants for farmers to provide a herd wide tuberculosis test following positive tests in recent years which would allow trace whether the source is internal or external to the herd; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6281/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Under the

Bovine TB Eradication Programme, every herd in the country must undergo at least one herd test annually. All eligible cattle on the holding, regardless of ownership, must be presented for testing.

Primary responsibility for arranging and paying for this annual test rests with the farmer. Where TB is found in a herd, a suite of supplementary testing is initiated by my Department which may include blood testing. For the most part, all supplementary testing is paid for by my Department and allied with this, an epidemiological assessment or investigation is carried out to determine the source of the infection.

Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme

890. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason donkeys cannot satisfy 100% of the stocking rate requirement for ANC grants; and if he will consider increasing the current ratio of 50%. [6365/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The change to the stocking density rules relating to donkeys under the Areas of Natural Constraints (ANC) scheme was introduced following consultation with the farming bodies and other relevant stakeholders. Applicants can now only use donkeys to fulfil 50% of their stocking requirements under the scheme. This change was introduced on foot of consideration of issues relating to animal welfare concerns and the role of the scheme in supporting active farming in eligible areas.

Following the agreement of this change with the farm bodies, the change in the requirements for the 2020 scheme was signalled to all applicants in the 2019 Scheme terms and conditions. This was in order to give applicants a full year to adapt their stocking practices where required. The remainder of the stocking requirement can be made up using cattle, sheep, goats, horses or deer.

Harbours and Piers Funding

891. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if funding will be made available for the extension of Renard pier, Cahersiveen, County Kerry by at least 30 metres in order to allow bigger and deeper trawlers land their catches. [6366/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): My Department owns, operates and maintains six designated State-owned Fishery Harbour Centres, located at Castletownbere, Dingle, Dunmore East, Howth, Killybegs and Ros An Mhíl under statute. In addition, my Department also has responsibility for the upkeep and maintenance of North Harbour at Cape Clear, as well as the maintenance of a small number of specific piers, lights and beacons throughout Ireland, in accordance with the Marine Works (Ireland) Act 1902, and piers, lights and beacons constructed under the auspices of the Congested Districts Board.

Renard Pier is owned by Kerry County Council and responsibility for its maintenance and development rests with that Local Authority in the first instance, and its parent Department, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government thereafter.

As my legislative remit does not extend to Renard Pier, and given that the ownership of, and overall responsibility for Renard Pier rests with the County Council, it is the Council who will decide if it wishes to carry out any further development, repair or maintenance.

My Department does however provide limited funding to assist coastal Local Authorities in

carrying out small scale projects for the development and repair of Local Authority owned piers, harbours and slipways under the annual Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme, subject to available Exchequer funding and overall national priorities. Since 2014, my Department has provided funding to the value of €335,235 to Kerry County Council for development and maintenance works at Renard Pier.

I have allocated funding of €3.1m for the Local Authority element of my Department's 2020 Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme with funding of €251,250 allocated for three projects in Kerry under this programme at Ventry, Glen Pier Ballinskelligs and Tarbert.

No application for funding in relation to Renard Pier was received under this year's programme. Should any application be submitted by Kerry County Council in relation to Renard Pier under any future programme, it will be given due consideration, taking into account the terms and conditions of the scheme, the priority attached by the Council and available funds.

Afforestation Programme

892. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a person (details supplied) in County Donegal will have their appeal heard against the refusal of an afforestation application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6421/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC) is operationally independent of my Department.

The FAC schedule their own cases for hearing and will be in touch directly with the person named regarding the scheduling of this hearing.

GLAS Issues

893. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to extend the GLAS scheme until a new scheme is established under the next CAP; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6430/20]

894. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if participants of the current GLAS scheme will be automatically included in an extension of the GLAS scheme; if they will be allowed to opt out of an extension; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6431/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I propose to take Questions Nos. 893 and 894 together.

In relation to the continuation of existing schemes under the Rural Development Programmes, as there is no certainty at EU level on the budget or on the timeframe of the transitional measures, it is not therefore possible to make decisions on the continuation of RDP schemes such as GLAS, until clarification is available. Ireland has pressed for the earliest possible adoption of this legislation, so that we can provide certainty to farmers and rural communities and plan for the transitional period with legal and financial certainty as soon as possible

Any extension to these schemes, would be dependent on the appropriate budget being available, as well as sufficient time being available from the adoption of the legal framework to allow administrative provisions to be put in place. The Department is currently considering these

matters in the context of giving effect in due course to the transitional arrangements should they be adopted.

I should clarify that as GLAS is a voluntary scheme, farmers in GLAS will not be obliged to participate in any transitional arrangements which are put in place once they have completed their existing five year contract.

Felling Licences

895. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the way in which the estimated number of cubic metres or hectares in respect of felling licences in the forestry industry are currently under appeal; when normal felling and the auctions for the felling of timber can resume; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6447/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Firstly, I am aware that there are currently delays to issuing forestry licences and I acknowledge that this is causing difficulties for some in the sector. The current licensing difficulties are as a result of the changes made to internal Appropriate Assessment Procedures (AAP). The Habitats Directive (Article 6.3) requires that where a plan or project is likely to have a significant effect on a Natura site, either individually or in-combination with other plans or projects, it must undergo an appropriate assessment of its implications for that Natura site. The changes now introduced were in response to important Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) decisions and their subsequent interpretation by the Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC) and others. These changes are unavoidable and are largely beyond the control of my Department.

Notwithstanding this, the situation with regard to felling licences has significantly improved since the start of 2020. Since January, 685 felling licences were issued up to 15th May. These licences cover over 6,000 ha and a volume in excess of nearly 1.7 million m³. My Department continues to issue new felling licences on a weekly basis.

I accept the current changes to procedures are very significant and significant resources have been devoted to introducing a robust and workable system, which meets the legislative requirements. My Department is now meeting those needs as follows:

- New forestry inspectors and additional administrative staff have been assigned to licensing. More forestry inspectors will be recruited in 2020.

- Two new ecologists have joined the Department ecology team, with four more to be appointed shortly.

- We have engaged external ecological expertise to help with the backlog of files. Four local ecologists have also been contracted to provide extra support. Further, an ecology contract with 5 new ecologists is due to be signed very soon.

- Additional administrative staff have been assigned to the Agriculture Appeals Office to assist with the increased workload of the Forestry Appeals Committee.

- Three planning officers have been contracted in to work with the Forestry Appeals Committee.

- A specialist mapping expert has been assigned to forestry issues.

My Department is the forestry licence consent authority and, since 2017, all licence applications are subject to a statutory public notification system. All forestry licence decisions are

subject to appeal by those dissatisfied with the decision and appeals must be lodged in writing within 28 days to the Forestry Appeals Committee, which is an independent body. Most appeals have been in connection with the Appropriate Assessment (AA) procedures. There are 2,262 hectares of felling licences currently under appeal with the FAC. It is worth noting that licences, once granted, are valid for a period of up to 10 years.

The timing of auctions of felled timber is a matter for the licence holders concerned and my Department has no role in relation to this.

Greyhound Industry

896. **Deputy Malcolm Noonan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if funds will be reallocated from the Irish Greyhound Board to animal welfare charities; if not, if such charities will be supported through other means (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6467/20]

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.

The welfare of greyhounds remains a priority for Bord na gCon and is a key consideration during the suspension of racing activity. From 24th March 2020, Bord na gCon has implemented a Covid-19 greyhound care payments scheme costing approximately €357,000 per month. Since the cessation of racing and the absence of any other income, Bord na gCon is solely reliant on the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund for its operational costs.

Animal welfare charities do invaluable work, which the State could never replicate, by virtue of their voluntary nature. My Department will give careful consideration to how we will support these charities in future, given the challenges they are facing and the loss of voluntary support because of the lockdown. We have provided advice to them regarding the care of animals and livestock, which includes the care of companion animals etc. I appreciate, however, that this is an area that will require ongoing vigilance.

Fishing Industry

897. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to include aquaculture vessels, for example, mussel dredgers under the terms of the voluntary fleet support scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6541/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I announced on 8 May a Covid-19 Temporary Fleet Tie-up Scheme for fishing vessels in the Polyvalent, Beam Trawl and Specific segments of the fleet, to be implemented under Ireland's European Maritime and Fisheries Fund Operational Programme 2014-20, co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union. The purpose of the scheme is to address the supply of fish to market so as to better balance the supply of fish from these vessels to the available market demand for these fish. The Scheme will be operational from 1 June and will allow vessel owners of fishing vessels to voluntarily opt to tie up for a maximum of two months over the period June to August.

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The Scheme will support the fixed costs incurred by the vessel owners and is designed to complement the Covid-19 wage supports and loan arrangements already being provided by Government to the fishing sector and indeed other sectors of our economy. The supports to fixed costs available under the Scheme range from €6,000 per month for a maximum of two months for the very largest vessels over 24 metres, to €500 per month for a maximum of two months for the very smallest vessels under 6 metres in length. More details available at the following link

<https://www.agriculture.gov.ie/press/pressreleases/2020/may/title,142520,en.html>

The Scheme is implemented under article 33 of the EMFF Regulation (508/2014) which allows aid to fishing vessels only for temporary cessation of fishing activities. Vessels in the aquaculture segment of the fleet are not included in the scope of the Regulation and, accordingly, their inclusion in the Tie-up Scheme is precluded.

Live Exports

898. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measures being taken to avoid future cancellations of live cattle consignments following the recent cancellation of a consignment to Algeria; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6552/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The export of live animals is a matter for private operators. In the case of the export in question, as with all other exports, the function of my Department was to ensure that all of the conditions of certification are met prior to export. These conditions relate to the health and welfare of the animals, and are generally set by the country of import.

In this case, my Department has worked closely and constructively with the exporter to ensure that the conditions of certification can be met.

Without the work of my Department, and its strong reputation for enforcement and integrity, there would be no live trade to Algeria or anywhere else. My Department has worked hard to negotiate a certificate for the livestock trade with Algeria, and these efforts included a trade visit to the Country in February 2020. The Department will continue to work constructively with exporters and to ensure that the conditions for export certification are met.

During my tenure as Minister, live exports numbers have doubled.

Meat Processing Plants

899. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a series of matters (details supplied) in relation to Covid-19 support at meat processing plants. [6554/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The information with regard to the numbers of workers tested or positive in meat plants is a matter for the personnel, the Food Businesses and the Health Service Executive.

My Department supplies PPE to its own staff and contractors in Food Businesses. It does not supply PPE to Food Business Personnel. Food business have put in place a range of protective practices and equipment to protect employee safety and these measures may vary slightly

from plant to plant, but may include the reduction of throughput rates at the plant, temperature checks on entry into the plant, the extension of operating hours and other safeguards such as “podding”, the provision of additional PPE, the use of perspex screens and the provision of additional facilities to support physical distancing measures.

A national Outbreak Control team has been established by the HSE to deal with all issues relating to Covid 19 in meat plants. My Department is represented on this committee and it is expected that recommendations, including any in relation to testing, will issue from this group in due course. Any clusters of cases in individual meat plants, in common with clusters in other workplaces, are dealt with by local HSE-led outbreak control teams.

Departmental Reports

900. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the breakdown in respect of the figures printed in the Annual Report 2018 of his Department in relation to the item marked other on the chart on page 10 in respect of agri-food sector imports and also in respect of item marked other on page 11 of the report in respect of prepared consumer food imports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6555/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Data on agri-food sector trade in my Department’s Annual Report is broken down into 26 categories identified and agreed by my Department and the Central Statistics Office. Products and Raw Goods are categorised using combined nomenclature (CN) codes, a European harmonised system used to classify goods for customs and trade. These categories include non-edible agri-food items such as Forestry and Animal Hides & Skins along with traditional food and beverage products.

The chart on page 10 of the Annual Report depicts the imports of agri-food products by category for the calendar year 2018. The “Other” category in this chart is comprised of Pigmeat, Forestry products, Fish, Live Animals, Vegetable Oils & Fats, Crude Animal & Vegetable Material, Wood Based Products, Beef, Other Meat & Meat Produce, Oilseeds & Oleaginous Fruit, Sheepmeat, Flax, Wool & Animal Hair, Eggs, Animal Oils & Fats, Animal Skins & Furs and Cotton.

Data on Prepared Consumer Foods (PCF) trade is a subset of agri-food trade and it is divided into 15 categories.

The following table gives a breakdown of agri-food and PCF imports for 2018 and 2019. The figures have been updated in line with the latest available datasets.

Chapter 6 of the Annual Review and Outlook for Agriculture, Food and the Marine 2019 (<https://www.agriculture.gov.ie/agri-foodindustry/agri-foodandtheeconomy/economicpublications/aro2019/>) provides more detailed data on Ireland’s agri-food and PCF trade.

[Breakdown]

Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme

901. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the requirement that donkeys can only make up a maximum of 50% of the stocking density requirement for payments under areas of natural constraint will be deferred in view of the fact that many farmers are unable to purchase extra stock due to marts remaining closed and or due

to restrictions in relation to travel distance from home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6625/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The changes to the stocking density rules relating to donkeys under the Areas of Natural Constraints (ANC) scheme were brought in following consultation with the farming bodies and other relevant stakeholders. Applicants can now only use donkeys to fulfil 50% of their stocking requirements under the scheme.

Following the agreement of this change with the farm bodies, the change in the requirements for the 2020 scheme was signalled to all applicants in the 2019 Scheme terms and conditions. This was in order to give applicants a full year to adapt their stocking practices where required.

My Department has been engaging with a number of marts in relation to the facilitation of the sale and purchase of livestock and mechanisms have been put in place by a number of mart owners which fully respect HSE guidelines in relation to physical distancing while also supporting the orderly sale of animals necessary to support the essential business of farming. Direct farm-to-farm sales are also permitted.

It should be noted that while donkeys can now only be used to fulfil 50% of a farmers stocking requirements under the scheme, the remainder of the stocking requirement can be made up using cattle, sheep, goats, horses or deer, providing flexibility for applicants to use animals other than cattle to reflect the nature of their holding requirements.

Agrifood Sector

902. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps that will be taken to ensure that the proposed An Bord Bia farm sustainability platform development will not impose further demands on farmers for meeting further quality and environmentally friendly requirements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6627/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I wish to advise the Deputy that all issues relating to the Bord Bia Sustainable Quality Assurance Programmes are an operational matter for that organisation.

However, I have been advised by Bord Bia that the primary objective of the proposed platform is to enable the Irish agri-sector to quantify and co-ordinate the totality of sustainability activity on Irish farms, and enable the recognition and quantification of the work that is already being done by farmers through their participation in existing programmes.

I understand that Bord Bia has decided that the tender process for a service provider to the Farm Sustainability Programme will be postponed by a minimum of two months to allow for further consultation.

Food Industry

903. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to deal with the surplus of potatoes here which are only suitable for processing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6628/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The majority of the potatoes grown in Ireland are produced for supply to the fresh retail market.

I am fully aware of the challenges posed by the closure of the food services sector, however it is well established that there has been particularly strong demand for potatoes at retail level in recent months. It is hoped that, in line with the Government's Roadmap for "Reopening Society and Business", demand will increase for potatoes in the catering and processing sectors also and there is some evidence of this already.

Of course, to address the particular challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Government, in conjunction with relevant state agencies, has introduced a range of measures to aid businesses that may be suffering short term financial problems. Bord Bia has also introduced a range of options to aid the horticulture sector. These range from financial support in the form of grants, to training and advice on how best to sustain businesses during this pandemic. There is a particular emphasis in these supports on opportunities to develop different markets, including through online sales.

Animal Welfare

904. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps he is taking to ensure the enforcement of horse welfare regulations, in particular for horses in urban areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6634/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Legislation relating to the welfare of horses, like that pertaining to the welfare of all species, is grounded in the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013. The legislation is applied by authorised officers based in my Department's network of regional veterinary offices, officers of the Dublin Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals as well as an Garda Síochána. On occasions, officers of Customs and Excise may also be called upon. The Chief Executive of a local authority may also appoint persons to act as authorised officers to enforce the provisions of this Act

There is a clear legislative distinction between matters relating to animal welfare and matters relating to control of horses. Under the Control of Horses Act 1996, a local authority may make bye-laws to control activities involving horses in its functional area and may prohibit the keeping of horses in specified areas.

My Department has also taken a proactive approach in tackling challenges that arise in the case of horses by developing facilities for urban and traveller horse populations and in educating young people among these communities in the care and welfare of horses. This work is done in close collaboration with the local authorities involved.

Live Exports

905. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the role his Department played in the events that resulted in the postponement and potential cancellation of a shipment of cattle exports to Algeria; if his Department will play a constructive role in facilitating future shipments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6647/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The export of live animals is a matter for private operators. In the case of the export in question, as with all other exports, the function of my Department was to ensure that all of the conditions of certification are met prior to export. These conditions relate to the health and welfare of the animals, and are generally set by the country of import.

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In this case, my Department has worked closely and constructively with the exporter to ensure that the conditions of certification can be met.

Without the work of my Department, and its strong reputation for enforcement and integrity, there would be no live trade to Algeria or anywhere else. My Department has worked hard to negotiate a certificate for the livestock trade with Algeria, and these efforts included a trade visit to the Country in February 2020. The Department will continue to work constructively with exporters and to ensure that the conditions for export certification are met.

During my tenure as Minister, live exports numbers have doubled.

Livestock Issues

906. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if urgent consideration will be given to the issues raised in correspondence from an association (details supplied) in view of the need to have marts functioning as much as possible with appropriate restrictions in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6660/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I recognise the vital economic and social role that livestock marts play in cattle and sheep farming in Ireland, and note the engagement between marts, their representative organisations and my Department, which has resulted in marts being permitted to conduct limited operations at this time.

The restrictions arising out of Ireland's public health response to the unprecedented challenge of Covid-19 is affecting every aspect of Irish life, and marts are no exception. On 31 March, my Department informed each licensed livestock mart that they could put in place alternative trade facilitation mechanisms that would support the orderly sale of animals necessary to support the essential business of farming. Any livestock mart wishing to engage in limited activities to facilitate the buying and selling of livestock was asked to submit for approval a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) demonstrating to the Department's satisfaction that the individual mart would be in a position to operate in full compliance with HSE guidelines in relation to hygiene and physical distancing. 80 of the 86 licensed marts submitted SOPs, and were approved to operate.

My Department will continue to engage constructively with marts and representative organisations. at this challenging time. In recent weeks a lot of preparatory work has been done, so that when considered appropriate in the context of the broader approach to Covid-19, further activities in marts can be facilitated while continuing to ensure the safety of mart staff and clients.

With regard to the financial challenges currently faced by marts, I have engaged with the banks on the specific liquidity and financing needs of farmers, fishers and agri-food businesses and have stressed the need for the banks to support and work with their customers through this challenging period. All the banks have announced that they will offer flexibility to their customers, and that they may be able to provide payment breaks or emergency working capital facilities. The advice is that farmers, fishers and agri-food businesses should engage with their bank at an early stage to discuss emerging cash flow issues. I welcomed the recent announcement by Banking & Payments Federation Ireland that their members, including the five main retail banks, have extended their payment break from three months to six months for those directly impacted by Covid-19.

In terms of supports, agri-food businesses, including marts, are eligible for the wide range of supports put in place for businesses generally. This includes the National COVID-19 In-

come Support Scheme, encompassing both the COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme and the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment. The €250 million SBCI COVID-19 Working Capital Scheme, co-financed by my Department, has also been deployed to address liquidity and financing needs of eligible businesses arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. For smaller businesses of less than 10 employees, Microfinance Ireland is also offering a COVID-19 Business Loan, providing working capital loans up to €50,000. The Future Growth Loan Scheme (FGLS), also co-financed by my Department, was launched last year and made €300m of investment loans available to eligible Irish businesses. Loans are competitively priced, for terms of 8-10 years, and support strategic long-term investment. As a result of the significant and sudden financial impact of the pandemic on businesses a second tranche of €200million, with up to 40% available to the agri-food sector, will be made available through the banks, with details to be announced shortly.

In addition, the Government has announced agreement of a further suite of measures to further support businesses that are negatively impacted by Covid-19. Work has commenced on a €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme to support lending to SMEs, including agri-businesses, farmers and fishers, for terms ranging from 3 months to 6 years, which will be below market interest rates. Other measures include a €10,000 restart grant for micro and small businesses based on a rates waiver/rebate from 2019; a three-month commercial rates waiver for impacted businesses; and the ‘warehousing’ of tax liabilities for a period of twelve months after recommencement of trading, during which time there will be no debt enforcement action taken by Revenue and no interest charge accruing in respect of the warehoused debt.

My Department will continue our close engagement with stakeholders across the agri-food in relation to the impact of Covid-19.

Poultry Industry

907. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will establish a compensation scheme in respect of the culling of poultry flocks which has resulted in huge losses for a number of poultry farmers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6689/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I am acutely aware of the difficulties currently being faced by the affected poultry producers in this instance. My Department has been and will continue to engage with representatives of the poultry sector, to seek to ensure that the current outbreak of avian influenza is dealt with in a timely and effective manner.

With regard the development of a support scheme for the current outbreak of low-pathogenic avian influenza, there is no legal basis for mandatory compensation in respect of the particular subtype of the disease identified, as it is not of a subtype defined as highly pathogenic under Council Directive 2005/94/EC. However, my Department is currently exploring potential for funding, in the context of the State Aid rules framework, to partially offset the costs of depopulation and rendering for those poultry farmers affected during the recent outbreak.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

908. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the specific proposals he put forward at the recent EU Agriculture and Fisheries Council in relation to the urgent need to provide adequate financial support for the farming sector in view of the

additional difficulties that have arisen for different sectors due to Covid-19; the outcome of such discussions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6717/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): On 13 May, I attended a video-conference meeting of EU Agriculture Ministers with Agriculture Commissioner, Janusz Wojciechowski, and Fisheries Commissioner, Virginijus Sinkevicius, to discuss the effectiveness of measures introduced by the Commission to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on agriculture and fisheries.

I welcomed these measures, which include, inter alia, private storage aid for the dairy and meat sectors which were a response to an Irish initiative. However, I also reiterated my ongoing concerns regarding the depth and potential duration of the crisis, and made it clear that these actions can only be the first step. In particular, I called for additional funding to be made available in the form of exceptional aid for livestock producers.

I also called for the CAP post-2020 budget to be fully restored in the next Multiannual Financial Framework. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the important role farmers play in putting food on European tables. They are also expected to contribute to achieving higher levels of climate ambition post-2020, and so we must ensure that we have a CAP budget that is fit for purpose.

Food Safety Standards

909. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to the implications on food production of a dispute between the Food Safety Authority of Ireland and the local authority veterinary service in relation to the funding of the service; if he has had communication or briefings with the Minister of Health regarding same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6797/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Funding for the Food Safety Authority of Ireland is a matter for the Minister for Health.

Fishing Fleet Protection

910. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will include in the voluntary fleet support scheme boats licensed for the fishing sector namely mussels (details supplied). [6820/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I announced on 8 May a Covid-19 Temporary Fleet Tie-up Scheme for fishing vessels in the Polyvalent, Beam Trawl and Specific segments of the fleet, to be implemented under Ireland's European Maritime and Fisheries Fund Operational Programme 2014-20, co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union. The purpose of the scheme is to address the supply of fish to market so as to better balance the supply of fish from these vessels to the available market demand for these fish.

The Scheme will be operational from 1 June and will allow vessel owners of fishing vessels to voluntarily opt to tie up for a maximum of two months over the period June to August. The Scheme will support the fixed costs incurred by the vessel owners and is designed to complement the Covid-19 wage supports and loan arrangements already being provided by Government to the fishing sector and indeed other sectors of our economy. The supports to fixed costs

available under the Scheme range from €6,000 per month for a maximum of two months for the very largest vessels over 24 metres, to €500 per month for a maximum of two months for the very smallest vessels under 6 metres in length. More details available at the following link

<https://www.agriculture.gov.ie/press/pressreleases/2020/may/title,142520,en.html>

The Scheme is implemented under article 33 of the EMFF Regulation (508/2014) which allows aid to fishing vessels only for temporary cessation of fishing activities. Vessels in the aquaculture segment of the fleet are not included in the scope of the Regulation and, accordingly, their inclusion in the Tie-up Scheme is precluded.

Animal Welfare

911. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the guidelines for pet groomers reopening (details supplied). [6821/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The current list of essential services includes the provision of veterinary, animal welfare and related services. Where there is a clear and an immediate welfare issue associated with an individual dog which needs to be groomed/clipped, this may be dealt with on animal welfare grounds whilst adhering to an operational protocol that is in compliance with the HSE advice regarding hand and respiratory hygiene and physical distancing and where engagement by appointment would be important factor. In the provision of essential services, providers should always consider whether such a service is actually essential at any point in time and how it can be undertaken such that it poses minimal risk of the provider and client.

The Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business further sets out the sequence by which businesses may incrementally reopen. This Roadmap is guided by over-riding principles and a focus – safe, rational, evidence-informed, fair, open and transparent and whole of society. The roadmap for Retail, Personal Services and Commercial activities are set out in Table 5 of the Roadmap document. All businesses that are preparing to resume work should do so in line with the Roadmap and in accord with the additional Return to Work Safely Protocol.

Animal Welfare

912. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to the fact that there are particular difficulties for dog owners and animal welfare caused by lack of access to dog grooming services; the steps he plans to take to assist such services in resuming; and his views on which stage of the 5 stage Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business is appropriate for dog grooming to resume. [6836/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The current list of essential services includes the provision of veterinary, animal welfare and related services. Where there is a clear and immediate welfare issue associated with an individual dog which needs to be groomed/clipped, this may be dealt with on animal welfare grounds whilst adhering to an operational protocol that is in compliance with the HSE advice regarding hand and respiratory hygiene and physical distancing and where engagement by appointment would be important factor. In the provision of essential services, providers should always consider whether such a service is actually essential at any point in time and how it can be undertaken such that it poses minimal risk of the provider and client.

The Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business further sets out the sequence by which businesses may incrementally reopen. This Roadmap is guided by over-riding principles and a focus – safe, rational, evidence-informed, fair, open and transparent and whole of society. The roadmap for Retail, Personal Services and Commercial activities are set out in Table 5. In addition businesses that are preparing to return to work in accord with the Roadmap, should proceed in line with the guidance set out in the Return to Work Safely Protocol.

Beef Industry

913. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on a proposal raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) regarding the BEAM scheme. [6904/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The objective of the Beef Exceptional Aid Measure (BEAM) was 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. This aid was granted to provide temporary market adjustment support in response to a specific market disturbance as outlined in Ireland's notification to the EU Commission and the 5% reduction was part of the conditionality sought by the EU.

Approved BEAM participants have given a commitment to reduce the production of bovine livestock manure nitrogen on the holding by 5% for the period 01 July 2020 to 30 June 2021 as compared with the period 01 July 2018 to 30 June 2019 as recorded on Department systems. Given the timeframes involved, it is not intended to review this commitment at this time.

Participants who require advice on the management of this reduction can contact the Department or consult an agricultural advisor.

Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme

914. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of applications received under the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme 2 in tabular form; the number of approved applications; the number of payment claims logged; the number of payment claims that have been approved for payment; the amount of funding allocated to the scheme under the 2014-2020 RDP; the amount expended to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6925/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): There are a wide variety of investment items available under the suite of seven measures under TAMS II. The financial allocation in respect of TAMS for the full Rural Development Programme period will be in the region of €395m. To date, total expenditure has exceeded €216m, with a further approximately €120m in commitments to farmers who have yet to make a payment claim. Payments continue to issue at the average rate of €1.3m per week.

I would encourage all farmers who have completed approved works and have payment claims outstanding in relation to TAMS II to submit them to the Department's online system as soon as the works are completed to facilitate the prompt issue of payments.

The information requested in tabular form is as set out in the following table:

STATUS	TOTAL
Applications Received	35,532
Approvals Issued	28,611
Payment Claims Received	15,250
Number Paid	14,424
Total amount Paid	€216,208,490

Departmental Contracts

915. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount spent on external consultants by his Department in 2019; the average hourly rate; if caps or limits on such spending are in place; the way in which conflicts of interest are managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7274/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): My Department seeks to minimise the use of consultants and only engages consultancy companies when particular additional expertise is required for delivery of the services which support the business processes of the Department. Such services are used in areas where the Department does not have the necessary expertise or internal capacity to deliver the services and where it would not make practical, operational or economic sense to build up this capability within the Department. Some engagements are necessary to satisfy auditing and EU regulatory requirements as to independent review. All contracts are negotiated with a view to achieving best value for money.

A total of €1,755,562 was spent by my Department on external consultants in 2019. It is not possible to provide the Deputy with the hourly rate as the majority of consultants were engaged under a framework agreement, set fee or fixed price contract.

My Department utilises the Office of Government Procurement (OGP) Request for Tender (RFT) services templates in the tendering of services, including consultant services. The RFT (Part 2, Section 2.18 – Conflicts of Interest) requires Tenderers to fully disclose any conflict of interest, or potential conflict of interest, on behalf of a tenderer, sub-contractor, or individual employee(s) or agent(s) of a tenderer or sub-contractor as soon as the conflict of interest is or becomes apparent. Section 2.18 also enables my Department to decide on the appropriate course of action and allows for, in appropriate circumstances, eliminating a Tenderer from the competition or termination of a contract.

The OGP Services Contract (Schedule A: Terms and Conditions, Clause 20 - Conflicts, Registrable Interests and Corrupt Gifts), which my Department also utilises in respect of services, including consultant services, reiterates the requirement for a conflict of interest check on the part of the contractor, and confers on my Department the right to terminate a contract if a conflict of interest is disclosed.

All staff in my Department sign an annual Conflict of Interest Declaration, while those engaged in the evaluation of responses to RFTs must also sign a conflict of interest form at evaluation stage in order to prevent, identify and remedy conflicts of interest in procurement procedures.

Departmental Correspondence

916. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action

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and Environment if a reply will issue to a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied) in relation to the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5989/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Seán Canney): The correspondence referred to has not been directly received by my Department or Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI). The IFI issued angling guidelines in relation to Covid-19 on 27 March and updated these on 5 May. My Department has forwarded the correspondence, received from the Deputy, to the IFI and asked it to consider it in the context of any further updated guidelines it may issue.

While inputs are appreciated, I should emphasise that angling guidelines must be based on the advice of NPHEA and any revision of same will be based on such advice.

I am happy to advise that angling representative bodies have confirmed to me their support for the guidelines and continue to encourage their members to comply with all measures advised by NPHEA.

Departmental Strategies

917. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment his views on a commitment (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6066/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): My Department has been examining this issue in detail and has engaged with relevant stakeholders, including representative organisations and the HSE, in an effort to see how best to provide a financial support to persons with long-term incontinence with respect to the disposal of medical incontinence wear. However, there are complex issues at play in this area, which are understandable given the sensitive nature of the medical data in question. Since mid-2017, a range of charging options have operated, which encourage householders to reduce and separate their waste. This provides flexibility to waste collectors to develop various service-price offerings that suit different household circumstances. Mandatory per kilogramme ‘pay by weight’ charging was not introduced. A Price Monitoring Group (PMG) was established in mid-2017 to monitor the on-going cost of residential waste collection to homeowners across Ireland as the ‘flat-rate structure’ was being phased out. While fluctuations in prices and service offerings have been observed, the overall trend has been relative price stability. Results from the PMG are available on my Department’s website.

Departmental Contracts

918. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if his Department has engaged the use of external consultants from 1 January 2020 to date; the details and costs of such engagements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5525/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): My Department administers a very diverse and complex brief. Its remit includes oversight of very complex policy areas, oversight of State regulation and service provision across key strategic services such as energy, environment, climate change and public broadcasting, as well as regulation of sectors such as mining and hydrocarbon exploration. Given the

technical complexity, economic significance and community interest in these areas, it is necessary that my Department, from time to time, procure specialist external professional advice to enable it to discharge its responsibility to deliver quality services and protect the interests of the State and the taxpayer. In procuring these services, my Department always seeks to ensure value for money and keeping expenditure to the minimum necessary.

The information requested in relation to my Department is outlined in the following table.

External Consultants engaged from 1 January 2020 to date;

Name of consultants	Details of Work undertaken	Total Cost of Contract (including VAT unless otherwise stated)
UCC	Consultancy to support work of the Technical Research and Modelling (TRAM) Group. Work focused on energy systems and climate modelling; The work is being undertaken as part of a 4 year publicly procured multiannual contract December 2018-2022;	€587,955 for 2020
Economic and Social Research Institute	Research Programme on Climate, Energy and the Economy 2020-2022; Work will include further development of the ESRI's I3E economic model; research relating to new EU emissions targets; development of carbon budgets and implementation of certain actions under the Climate Action Plan 2019.	€600,000 over 3 years
Tobins Consulting Engineers	National Litter Pollution Monitoring System -29th April – 12 month Contract Extension	€47,109
Crowleys DFK	Internal audit Services	Drawdown Contract @ €707.25 per day
Mazars	External Quality Assurance of Audit Committee Consultancy	€30,135
Ramboll UK Ltd	Environmental Assessment of applications for consent for off-shore geophysical, environmental, seismic survey and/or exploratory drilling activities.	€4,833.90
Norcontel	Review of products for deployment under the Metropolitan Area Networks Concession Agreement	€4,305
Analysys Mason	Technical and financial advice in respect of Galway-Mayo Telecommunications Infrastructure Project	€122,508

Name of consultants	Details of Work undertaken	Total Cost of Contract (including VAT unless otherwise stated)
Eversheds Sutherland	Provision of corporate legal and tax advice in relation to the NDRC procurement.	€2,500 - €3,150 (ex VAT)
Hayes Solicitors	Legal advisory services in respect of compliance with court discovery order	€69,054.75
Matheson	Specialist legal advice	€5,009.18
MKO	SEA/AA screening of National Energy and Climate Plan	€9,102
Analysys Mason	Provision of technical advisory services to support the implementation of the National Broadband Plan	€7,485,400 (ex VAT - two year drawdown contract)
Quadra Consulting	Review of GSI SOP's, Risk Assessments and Method Statements.	€700 per day (estimated 2-4 days)
McKinsey and Company Inc. Ireland	This work was the subject of a Request for Tender in September 2019. The contract is to provide: (i) a Marginal Abatement Cost Curves to identify least cost 2050 decarbonisation pathways for Ireland, including net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050;(ii) a Marginal Abatement Cost Curve to identify the abatement potential of circular economy (including bio-economy) activities; and assistance in the development of a pilot aggregated retrofitting model for Ireland. The contract is ongoing.	€861,000 (1 year contract)
EnvEcon	Consultancy to support work of the Technical Research and Modelling (TRAM) Group. Work focused on climate and air quality modelling; in addition work during 2020 will include support to the Department in implementing elements of EU Directive 2019/904 on the reduction of the impact of certain plastic products on the environment (the Single Use Plastics Directive). The work is being undertaken as part of a 4 year publicly procured multiannual contract November 2018-2022;	€470,537 for 2020

Name of consultants	Details of Work undertaken	Total Cost of Contract (including VAT unless otherwise stated)
UCD	Consultancy to support work of the Technical Research and Modelling (TRAM) Group. Work focused on electricity systems modelling; The work is being undertaken as part of a 4 year publicly procured multiannual contract February 2019-2023;	€341,264 for 2020
Byrne Wallace	Legal Advice	€3,863.97

National Broadband Plan

919. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the status of the roll out of the National Broadband Plan in view of ongoing restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5540/20]

925. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if he will publish an updated timeline for the delivery of the National Broadband Plan. [5861/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 919 and 925 together.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) contract was signed with National Broadband Ireland (NBI) in November last to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the nearly 540,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools.

The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 150Mbps from the outset. By the end of next year, NBI plans to pass approximately 115,000 premises, with 70,000 - 100,000 passed each year thereafter until rollout is completed. All counties will see premises passed in the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State will have access to high speed broadband within the next four years. The first homes passed will be able to get connected before the end of this year.

Deployment activities related to the National Broadband Plan (NBP) are continuing, in line with the advice provided by Government and the HSE during the Covid-19 event, and key mobilisation and design activities continue to be progressed.

To support remote working and connected communities, approximately 300 Broadband Connections Points (BCPs) are scheduled to be connected to high speed broadband this year. This will assist communities to quickly get free public access to high speed broadband, in advance of the main NBP deployment. The planned BCP locations, including schools, library hubs and local sports are available to view on the High Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. It should be noted that some BCP locations may be subject to change.

These BCPs will leverage the high speed broadband connection through a range of measures and initiatives, for example providing free public Wi-Fi, some will also have hot-desks, and some will be digital hub business centres where digital training, business information events

and other SME supports are organised. The BCP delivery project is well underway and surveying of the BCP locations is progressing, which will facilitate detailed design and installation.

Just Transition Commissioner

920. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the supports in place to support the Just Transition Commissioner; his views on whether they are appropriate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5541/20]

926. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment when he received the Mulvey Report on the just transition strategy; the reason for not publishing it to date; if it will be published immediately; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5886/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 920 and 926 together.

The Government has appointed Mr Kieran Mulvey as the Just Transition Commissioner on a non-statutory basis to facilitate discussions and work with stakeholders to develop, mobilise and deliver opportunities for the Midlands for both the workers directly affected and the wider community. I have asked the commissioner to engage with all relevant stakeholders, including local community organisations, Bord na Móna, ESB, the Midlands Transition Team, Local Authorities, public representatives, and relevant trade unions and workers' representatives.

The Commissioner will report to Government through me and I have asked him to consider specifically a number of matters in framing his recommendations including: the delivery of the just transition measures provided for in budget 2020; the optimal structures or processes to support co-ordinated and effective delivery, including developing liaison channels between institutions in the region and central Government; the implementation of other actions underway, or planned, by Departments and Agencies that could assist in the just transition; and any additional actions or measures that he considers appropriate for Government consideration. The Commissioner has also been invited to take account of relevant existing plans and programmes such as the Regional Enterprise Plan for the Midlands.

I received the Commissioner's first progress report at the end of April and, following its consideration by relevant Government Departments, I intend to bring this report to Government and to publish it shortly.

The Commissioner is undertaking his work on a part time basis, with administrative support provided by my Department. The Commissioner is also being supported in his engagements with stakeholders in the Midlands, as required, by the secretariat to the existing Midlands Regional Transition Team. I intend to further consider these arrangements in the context of the envisaged ongoing role for the Commissioner in relation to just transition in the Midlands.

The Government has committed significant resources in 2020, through allocating a portion of the additional carbon tax revenue to be raised on foot of Budget 2020, to measures to support the delivery of an effective just transition for the Midlands. This includes €20 million for a new energy efficiency retrofitting scheme to be focused on the Midlands, €5 million for peatland rehabilitation outside of the Bord na Móna estate, and €6 million for a dedicated new just transition fund (with a further €5m coming from ESB in 2020). The Government is also seeking to bring forward appropriate measures to support a much higher level of bog restoration on Bord na Móna bogs and to provide for a continued role for existing Bord na Móna workers on these bogs.

Broadcasting Sector

921. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the funding released to date from the sound and vision fund for broadcasters experiencing difficulties related to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5542/20]

937. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if support packages are being put in place to assist provincial newspapers and local radio stations (details supplied). [6452/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 921 and 937 together.

I have no statutory function in relation to print media other than in relation to media mergers. Funding under the Sound and Vision Scheme is restricted under the Broadcasting Act 2009 to broadcast media and is funded by TV licence receipts.

At my request, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) has waived the broadcasting levy for the independent radio sector for quarters 1 and 2, 2020 which will save the sector €1m. This waiver covers all independent radio at national, regional and local level as well as community radio.

The BAI are engaging with other broadcasters to track the impact of the crisis and to explore possible responses by the Authority. In this regard a Revised Sectoral Development Plan is due to be ratified by the BAI in the coming week.

The final round of Sound and Vision 3 was announced in March 2020 awarding just over €7m for 126 projects (€6.4m for 36 TV and €605k to 90 radio projects). The BAI is currently liaising with grantees to facilitate payments for pre-production and administrative work where the grantee is unable to start filming or recording. The first payments under this scheme are commencing this month.

The BAI has also agreed to my request to put in place a Covid 19 funding round under the Sound and Vision 4 Scheme of €2.5m for commercial radio given their important role in awareness-raising of Covid 19 at local level. This round is now underway with applications currently being assessed with decisions expected by the end of May.

The commercial radio round of Sound and Vision will be complemented by a funding round of €750,000 for the community radio sector. There will be further rounds later in 2020 for television and public service radio.

Print Media

922. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if he has met representatives of the print sector to discuss issues related to the impact of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5543/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I have no statutory function in relation to newspapers other than in relation to media mergers.

Telecommunications Services

923. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if matters raised in correspondence from a person (details supplied) will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5557/20]

941. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if his Department has conducted health research on 5G; the status of a national risk assessment of technologies or equipment involved with the roll out of 5G networks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6545/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 923 and 941 together.

The matter of potential health impacts of exposure to non-ionising radiation is informed by a substantial volume of internationally recognised scientific research and evidence. International organisations such as the World Health Organisation have assessed that there is no established scientific evidence to support any adverse health effects to individuals below the exposure levels set by International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection (ICNIRP).

The ICNIRP guidelines provide scientifically-based exposure limits that are applicable to both public and occupational exposure from electromagnetic fields (EMF). They apply up to a frequency of 300 gigahertz (GHz), well above the maximum frequencies being considered for 5G. The guidelines are based on evidence gathered from all peer-reviewed scientific literature and not on the conclusions of any single scientific paper, event, or other source; updated guidelines, were released in March 2020.

Details of Irish Government commissioned reports in the area of potential health effects of electromagnetic fields are available on my Department's website at this link: <https://www.dccae.gov.ie/en-ie/environment/topics/environmental-radiation/electromagnetic-fields/Pages/Frequently-Asked-Questions-on-Electromagnetic-Fields.aspx>

Moreover, as Minister for Communications, Climate action and Environment, I assigned a new statutory function to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) last year to provide general information to the public in this regard, to monitor scientific developments and provide independent advice to my Department in this area. Information is published on the EPA's website at <http://www.epa.ie/radiation/emf/>

As regards 5G, the roll-out of infrastructure in Ireland is primarily a matter for private mobile network operators, operating in a liberalised market. The regulation of these service providers, to the extent permitted by law, is a statutory function of the communications regulator, ComReg. This role includes the monitoring of compliance by authorised operators with terms and conditions, including with respect to non-ionising radiation levels. ComReg is statutorily independent in the exercise of its functions. Its most recent report on its measuring of Non-Ionising Radiation levels in public areas can be found on ComReg's website www.comreg.ie.

Broadband Service Provision

924. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if the broadband and connectivity issues outlined by a person (details supplied) will be examined; and if they will be engaged with and advised on the measures being taken to address their case and similar cases. [5700/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Question refers to a premises which is located in the BLUE area on the NBP High Speed Broadband Map, which is available on my Department's website at <http://www.broadband.gov.ie> BLUE areas are parts of the country where commercial operators are already providing high speed broadband or have indicated future plans to do so. The Department defines high speed broadband as a connection with minimum speeds of 30Mbps download and 6Mbps upload. There may be a choice of operators offering this service in the area referred to and further information in this regard is available at www.comreg.ie/compare/#/services.

Complaints about service provision are initially between the consumer and the service provider. If this avenue has been exhausted without a satisfactory resolution, the Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) may be able to assist further. ComReg is the independent body that issues licences to broadband service providers and investigates complaints to make sure that companies are delivering services in line with their licence obligations.

Question No. 925 answered with Question No. 919.

Question No. 926 answered with Question No. 920.

National Broadband Plan

927. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment when the roll out of the National Broadband Plan will commence in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5987/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The National Broadband Plan (NBP) contract was signed with National Broadband Ireland (NBI) in November last to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the nearly 540,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools. The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 150Mbps from the outset. By the end of next year, NBI plans to pass approximately 115,000 premises, with 70,000 - 100,000 passed each year thereafter until rollout is completed. All counties will see premises passed in the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State will have access to high speed broadband within the next four years. The first homes passed will be able to get connected before the end of this year.

To support remote working and connected communities, approximately 300 Broadband Connections Points (BCPs) are scheduled to be connected to high speed broadband this year, including sites in Donegal. This will assist communities to quickly get free public access to high speed broadband, in advance of the main NBP deployment. The planned BCP locations, including schools, library hubs and local sports are available to view on the High Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. It should be noted that some BCP locations may be subject to change.

These BCPs will leverage the high speed broadband connection through a range of measures and initiatives, for example providing free public Wi-Fi, some will also have hot-desks, and some will be digital hub business centres where digital training, business information events and other SME supports are organised. The BCP delivery project is well underway and surveying of the BCP locations is progressing, which will facilitate detailed design and installation.

Broadband Service Provision

928. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the status of the provision of fibre broadband to a property (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6087/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The government is committed to delivering high speed broadband to every home, farm, business and school in Ireland. It is vital that we ensure the people of rural Ireland have the same opportunities as the people in our towns and cities. The Question refers to a premises which is located in the AMBER area on the NBP High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website at www.broadband.gov.ie. The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led Intervention, the contract for which was signed in November last with National Broadband Ireland (NBI).

All counties will see premises passed in the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State will have access to high speed broadband within the next four years. The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 150Mbps from the outset. By the end of next year, NBI plans to pass approximately 115,000 premises, with 70,000 - 100,000 passed each year thereafter until rollout is completed.

I note that there is fibre installation close to the premises mentioned in the Question, however, eir's rural deployment of high speed broadband is a commercial undertaking and not part of the planned State Intervention network. The decision as to what areas and premises are served was made by eir on a commercial basis and my Department has no statutory authority to intervene in that process.

To support remote working and connected communities, approximately 300 Broadband Connections Points (BCPs) are scheduled to be connected to high speed broadband this year. This will assist communities to quickly get free public access to high speed broadband in advance of the main NBP deployment. The planned BCP locations, including schools, library hubs and local sports are available to view on the High Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. It should be noted that some BCP locations may be subject to change.

These BCPs will leverage the high speed broadband connection through a range of measures and initiatives, for example providing free public Wi-Fi, some will also have hot-desks, and some will be digital hub business centres where digital training, business information events and other SME supports are organised. The BCP delivery project is well underway and surveying of the BCP locations is progressing, which will facilitate detailed design and installation.

Broadband Service Provision

929. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the reason a person (details supplied) cannot get adequate broadband to run their business from home. [6121/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The government is committed to delivering high speed broadband to every home, farm, business and school in Ireland. It is vital that we ensure the people of rural Ireland have the same opportunities as the people in our towns and cities. The Question refers to a premises which is located in the AMBER area on the NBP High Speed Broadband Map which is avail-

able on my Department's website at www.broadband.gov.ie. The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led Intervention, the contract for which was signed in November last with National Broadband Ireland (NBI).

All counties will see premises passed in the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State will have access to high speed broadband within the next four years. The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 150Mbps from the outset. By the end of next year, NBI plans to pass approximately 115,000 premises, with 70,000 - 100,000 passed each year thereafter until rollout is completed.

While I note that there is fibre installation close to the premises mentioned in the Question, eir's rural deployment of high speed broadband is a commercial undertaking and not part of the planned State Intervention network. Decisions regarding what areas and premises were served was made a commercial basis by eir and my Department has no statutory authority to intervene in that process.

To support remote working and connected communities, approximately 300 Broadband Connections Points (BCPs) are scheduled to be connected to high speed broadband this year. This will assist communities to quickly get free public access to high speed broadband in advance of the main NBP deployment. The planned BCP locations, including schools, library hubs and local sports are available to view on the High Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. It should be noted that some BCP locations may be subject to change.

These BCPs will leverage the high speed broadband connection through a range of measures and initiatives, for example providing free public Wi-Fi, some will also have hot-desks, and some will be digital hub business centres where digital training, business information events and other SME supports are organised. The BCP delivery project is well underway and surveying of the BCP locations is progressing, which will facilitate detailed design and installation.

Broadband Service Provision

930. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the location fibre broadband has been installed in a rural area of County Kerry (details supplied); when the connection of broadband to a house in the area will continue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6170/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The government is committed to delivering high speed broadband to every home, farm, business and school in Ireland. It is vital that we ensure the people of rural Ireland have the same opportunities as the people in our towns and cities. The Question refers to a premises which is located in the AMBER area on the NBP High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website at www.broadband.gov.ie. The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led Intervention, the contract for which was signed in November last with National Broadband Ireland (NBI).

All counties will see premises passed in the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State will have access to high speed broadband within the next four years. The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 150Mbps from the outset. By the end of next year, NBI plans to pass approximately 115,000 premises, with 70,000 - 100,000 passed each year thereafter until rollout is completed.

While I note that fibre installation is taking place close to the premises referenced in the

Question, eir's rural deployment of high speed broadband is a commercial undertaking and not part of the planned State Intervention network. Decisions as to what areas and premises are served were made by eir on a commercial basis and my Department has no statutory authority to intervene in that process.

To support remote working and connected communities, approximately 300 Broadband Connections Points (BCPs) are scheduled to be connected to high speed broadband this year. This will assist communities to quickly get free public access to high speed broadband in advance of the main NBP deployment. The planned BCP locations, including schools, library hubs and local sports are available to view on the High Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. It should be noted that some BCP locations may be subject to change.

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National Broadband Plan Expenditure

931. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the amount spent on the national broadband plan over the past five years (details supplied); and the total internal costs incurred by his Department to date on the project. [6160/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The contract signed with National Broadband Ireland in November 2019 is the Government's plan to rollout high speed broadband to the 1.1 million people living and working in the nearly 540,000 premises including almost 100,000 businesses and farms, along with 695 schools, where commercial operators will not commit to deliver the service.

It will ensure that one quarter of the country mostly living in rural Ireland are not left behind. Without high speed broadband it will be much more difficult to sustain existing jobs or create new ones. It will make it possible for rural Ireland to take advantage of the opportunities created by the digital economy, from health care to farming from education to agricultural development to tourism

The total amount spent on the National Broadband Plan over the past five years is €40,427,264 including VAT.

A breakdown of the amount spent by year is set out the table:

Year	Amount Spent
2020	€13,568,565
2019	€6,131,959
2018	€8,330,653
2017	€10,050,428
2016	€2,345,659

My Department's NBP team has also been supported by other officers across the Department. While the Department does not operate on a basis of allocating costs for each staff mem-

ber across its range of functions, salary and other administration related costs for the Department are published in the annual Estimates and in the Appropriation Account.

All large projects require significant preparatory expenditure prior to commencement; this is particularly the case for complex, long term projects with financial, technical and legal elements such as the NBP.

Broadband Service Provision

932. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if he will request an update from a company (details supplied) regarding roll-out times; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6221/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The government is committed to delivering high speed broadband to every home, farm, business and school in Ireland. It is vital that we ensure the people of rural Ireland have the same opportunities as the people in our towns and cities.

The Question refers to areas in Co. Westmeath which are located in the AMBER area on the NBP High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website at www.broadband.gov.ie. The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led Intervention, the contract for which was signed in November last with National Broadband Ireland (NBI).

All counties will see premises passed in the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State will have access to high speed broadband within the next four years. The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 150Mbps from the outset. By the end of next year, NBI plans to pass approximately 115,000 premises, with 70,000 - 100,000 passed each year thereafter until rollout is completed.

To support remote working and connected communities, approximately 300 Broadband Connections Points (BCPs) are scheduled to be connected to high speed broadband this year. This will assist communities to quickly get free public access to high speed broadband in advance of the main NBP deployment. The planned BCP locations, including schools, library hubs and local sports are available to view on the High Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. It should be noted that some BCP locations may be subject to change.

These BCPs will leverage the high speed broadband connection through a range of measures and initiatives, for example providing free public Wi-Fi, some will also have hot-desks, and some will be digital hub business centres where digital training, business information events and other SME supports are organised. The BCP delivery project is well underway and surveying of the BCP locations is progressing, which will facilitate detailed design and installation.

Energy Production

933. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the policy on the development of hydrogen power here; if he has had engagements, discussions or paper exchanges with the Commission for Regulation of Utilities regarding its potential as a power source; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6227/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard

Bruton): The Government has set a target of 70% of electricity consumption to come from renewable sources (mainly wind and solar) by 2030 as part of the Climate Action Plan. The production of hydrogen from renewable electricity at times of low electricity demand could provide a zero-emission energy source for use in sectors such as transport and industry.

The European Union's Green Deal and Industrial Strategy prioritise the need to develop hydrogen in achieving climate neutrality by 2050. The European Commission is also expected to publish a new strategy for smart sector integration which will set out a vision for clean hydrogen. My Department is a member of the European Union's Hydrogen Energy Network which is a platform for the exchange of information and good practices on hydrogen as an energy carrier. In addition, my Department is a member of the North Seas Energy Cooperation which supports the development of the offshore renewable energy potential in the region and is examining the role that hydrogen can play in reaching our climate and energy ambitions.

At a national level my Department regularly engages with a range of key stakeholders including the Commission for Regulation of Utilities and Gas Networks Ireland. In addition, my Department is a policy stakeholder with Hydrogen Mobility Ireland – an industry-led group seeking to develop hydrogen as a transport fuel.

My Department will continue to work with European and national stakeholders to develop policy in relation to the role of hydrogen in Ireland's transition to a low carbon economy and society.

Electricity Generation

934. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if a new wind farm located here that feeds its electricity into the Northern Ireland grid will be able to qualify for funding under the proposed new renewable electricity support scheme; if not, if contractual arrangements that provide for the power to be sold on from the Northern Ireland grid to end users here would ensure that the electricity produced can qualify for the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6237/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS) is an auction based framework whereby renewable electricity projects compete to receive a guaranteed support price for the electrical energy they produce. The first RESS auction is underway and the qualification window closed on 30 April 2020.

The terms and conditions of the first RESS auction states that eligible projects must be geographically located in the Republic of Ireland (section 6.4.11 refers) and have either (i) an existing grid connection agreement with ESB Networks or EirGrid or, (ii) be eligible to receive a grid connection offer from these system operators under the Enduring Connection Policy-1 (section 6.4.5 refers). Therefore, the project referred to is not eligible to compete in the first RESS auction. For clarity, it is noted that if a project is connecting into another jurisdiction then the grid connection offer would be issued by the relevant system operator in that jurisdiction.

The RESS support is linked to the individual project successful in an auction, therefore, support payments are only made for energy produced by RESS projects. However, other routes to market and contractual arrangements may be open to such projects, such as corporate power purchase agreements.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

935. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if there is legislation addressing emissions from the domestic burning of wood in open fires or in stoves; if not, his plans to bring forward legislation on this matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6324/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): Successive Governments have committed to substantially reducing air pollution and achieving significant improvements in ambient air quality. For example, the ban on the sale, marketing, distribution and burning of bituminous coal (the “smoky coal ban”, as it is commonly known) – which was first introduced in Dublin in 1990 and now applies to another 26 areas which are known as “low smoke zones” - has been very effective in improving air quality and public health within these areas. An additional group of 13 urban areas are due to be designated as “low smoke zones” from September 2020.

Regulating the sale and use of wood for domestic heating is challenging because of the wide range of sources of wood available and the considerable variation in the quality of the wood itself. It must also be considered in tandem with other sources of solid fuels used in homes across the country, to ensure that any measures introduced would be effective in reducing emissions, as well as being fair, reasonable and enforceable. Stakeholder engagement will, therefore, play an important role in any such process.

A number of measures to improve air quality and reduce emissions from wood burning have already been adopted. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has taken steps to raise the standard of wood used through the voluntary Wood Fuel Quality Assurance Scheme, as better quality wood with a low moisture content tends to have lower emissions.

Meanwhile, the European Committee for Standardisation (CEN) has developed standards for solid biofuels, including wood biomass, under Technical Committee (TC) 335 Solid Biofuels, which Ireland has adopted. Although it is not a legal obligation for fuel suppliers to apply this standard, it is strongly recommended that consumers look for fuels meeting the standard when purchasing wood fuels.

Also at EU level, Ireland supported the introduction of stringent emission standards from solid fuel space heaters under the Eco Design Directive (2009/125/EC). These standards will apply to all new stoves, and must be introduced by the year 2022. A number of manufacturers have already placed a range of “Eco Design Stoves” on the market.

As regards the broader issue of Ireland’s overall air quality, significant air quality gains will be realised as a consequence of many of the actions contained in the Climate Action Plan. The Department is also currently developing an all-of-Government Clean Air Strategy which will provide an overarching policy framework within which clean air policies can be formulated and given effect in a manner consistent with national priorities, as well as EU and other international policy considerations.

Broadband Service Provision

936. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the position regarding the provision of broadband for a person close to the area covered by Eir fibre broadband network (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6436/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The government is committed to delivering high speed broadband to every home, farm, business and school in Ireland. It is vital that we ensure the people of rural Ireland have the same opportunities as the people in our towns and cities.

The Question refers to a premises which is located in the AMBER area on the NBP High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website at www.broadband.gov.ie. The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led Intervention, the contract for which was signed in November last with National Broadband Ireland (NBI).

All counties will see premises passed in the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State will have access to high speed broadband within the next four years. The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 150Mbps from the outset. By the end of next year, NBI plans to pass approximately 115,000 premises, with 70,000 - 100,000 passed each year thereafter until rollout is completed.

With regard to the fibre installation close the premises mentioned in the Question, eir's rural deployment of high speed broadband is a commercial undertaking and 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.

To support remote working and connected communities, approximately 300 Broadband Connections Points (BCPs) are scheduled to be connected to high speed broadband this year. This will assist communities to quickly get free public access to high speed broadband in advance of the main NBP deployment. The planned BCP locations, including schools, library hubs and local sports are available to view on the High Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. It should be noted that some BCP locations may be subject to change.

These BCPs will leverage the high speed broadband connection through a range of measures and initiatives, for example providing free public Wi-Fi, some will also have hot-desks, and some will be digital hub business centres where digital training, business information events and other SME supports are organised. The BCP delivery project is well underway and surveying of the BCP locations is progressing, which will facilitate detailed design and installation.

Question No. 937 answered with Question No. 921.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

938. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if hedgerows on agricultural land should be included and counted towards the total reduction targets in climate emissions in view of the fact that they are natural carbon collectors (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6469/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): Greenhouse gas emissions and removals associated with land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) are reported in Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions inventory prepared by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and submitted annually to the EU and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. LULUCF includes activities associated with forestry, croplands, grasslands, wetlands, settlements and other lands. Hedgerows, as

landscape features within the cropland and grassland categories, can form part of the emission and removal estimates for these land use categories. It is important to note that emissions and removals of greenhouse gases associated with land based activities are reported in a different category to those associated with agricultural activity, in line with international reporting guidelines.

While such emissions are not currently accounted for in relation to the calculation of compliance with Ireland's emissions targets in the period to 2020, from 2021 onwards these emissions will be integrated into the EU framework for compliance with national emissions targets. It is, therefore, essential that Ireland has robust policies in place to manage emissions and enhance removals from LULUCF.

Ministerial Meetings

939. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if he has met formally with the director general of RTÉ in the past three months. [6505/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I met with the Director General of RTÉ once in the last three months; the meeting took place by videoconference on 8th April, 2020.

Broadcasting Sector

940. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the current and capital expenditure allocations to TG4 in each of the years 2018 to 2020, in tabular form. [6536/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The information requested by the Deputy is set out in the following table and comprises outturn figures for 2018 and 2019 and the Revised Estimate for 2020:

	2018	2019	2020
Current Funding	€33,790,000	€34,233,000	€34,233,000
Capital Funding	€2,000,000	€2,000,000	€3,000,000
Total	€35,790,000	€36,233,000	€37,233,000

*TG4 also received a once off capital grant of €985,000 in 2018 for expenditure relating to Bliain na Gaeilge.

Question No. 941 answered with Question No. 923.

Electric Vehicles

942. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the funding available to local authorities to install public e-car charging points in each of the past two years; the funding each local authority has requested and drawn down in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6547/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): Under the Climate Action Plan, the Public Charge Point Scheme has been in place since

September 2019 to provide funding to local authorities for the development of on-street public chargers. The primary focus of this scheme is to provide support for the installation of infrastructure which will facilitate owners of EVs, who do not have access to a private parking space but rely on parking their vehicles in public places to charge their EVs.

The Climate Action Plan commits to the development of an electric vehicle charger strategy to ensure that the supply of vehicle charging infrastructure stays ahead of demand.

My Department, via the SEAI, currently provides a grant of up to €5,000 to support the installation of these charge points. Budget 2020 provided an allocation of €2 million which can support up to 400 on-street charge points this year. Since the launch of the scheme, the SEAI has received 12 requests from various local authorities for the scheme with two local authorities planning to install 24 charge points as outlined in the table. It is hoped that these projects will commence shortly once the terms and conditions have been finalised by the SEAI.

Dublin City Council	4 charge points
Louth County Council	20 charge points

As we emerge from the Covid pandemic and enter the recovery phase the further roll out of the Public Charge Point Scheme is expected to intensify. In this regard the Government is fully committed to supporting this programme and the other supports it has made available for the roll out of EVs so as to ensure we meet our ambitious commitments as set out in the Climate Action Plan.

Postal Services

943. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the position regarding the turnaround times for new eircodes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6731/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): Eircodes are assigned to new property addresses using a valid postal address and verified geo-locations. An Post collects information on new and existing buildings, as well as changes to existing addresses and Ordnance Survey Ireland provides the geo-locations for these buildings. An Post GeoDirectory issue a new release of the GeoDirectory database file on a quarterly basis to Capita Business Support Services Ireland, trading as Eircode, in accordance with their licence agreement.

Each new postal address assigned an Eircode is published on the free to use Eircode Finder website, a notification letter is issued to the property occupant containing the Eircode of that address and an updated Eircode Database is provided to licenced businesses for their use. Eircode have informed my Department that over 110,000 property addresses have been assigned an Eircode since the launch in 2015.

In recognition of the fact that earlier assignment of Eircodes to new builds is desirable, my officials are working with An Post, Ordnance Survey Ireland (OSi), An Post GeoDirectory and Capita to improve and expedite the existing process.

Covid-19 Pandemic

944. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the engagements he has had with utility companies in an effort to reduce con-

sumer utility bills during the Covid-19 crisis; if he has considered or proposed the introduction of off-peak rates on a permanent basis for telephone, broadband, electricity and gas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6762/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I recognise how vital telecommunications services are to citizens for so many aspects of their daily lives, including remote working and staying in touch with family members during the Covid-19 crisis. I and my officials are also very focussed on the need to ensure that telecommunications customers are sympathetically treated at this very challenging time. In that regard, officials from my Department have been engaging intensively with ComReg and with telecommunications industry.

As the Deputy may be aware, I recently signed regulations enabling ComReg to release additional rights of use for radio spectrum on a temporary basis. This will provide flexibility for mobile network operators to create additional capacity for mobile phone and broadband services and accommodate the increased demand at this time.

In addition, on 15th of April 2020, I announced that all major telecommunications providers have committed to a number of measures to help people stay in touch and work from home during Covid 19 including:

1. Any fixed broadband customers who do not have unlimited usage already as standard will be given the opportunity, if they require, to upgrade their package (which may be on a temporary basis), with their current service provider.

2. Any customer who does not have fixed broadband and who relies solely on mobile access to the Internet will have the opportunity to avail of affordable unlimited mobile data access/package from their service provider.

3. Fair usage policies will not be automatically applied to unlimited fixed and mobile data packages.

4. Service providers may implement appropriate permitted traffic management measures to avoid network congestion.

5. Access to healthcare and educational resource websites identified by the Government will be zero-rated for all customers where technically feasible.

6. So that customers can remain connected during the crisis, service providers will engage with any customer that contacts them who is in financial difficulty as a result of Covid-19 and has difficulty paying their bills to agree the best way of keeping them connected to voice and data.

7. Service Providers will work with ComReg in the event of complaints raised to ComReg by consumers, who consider they are not being treated in accordance with these commitments.

In addition to these measures, operators have also independently implemented further supports for consumers, with one operator recently announcing a range of packages providing unlimited data while another operator has removed all limits on calls, text and data.

In relation to energy utilities, the supply of electricity and gas are also vital services for citizens for so many aspects of their daily lives. Responsibility for the regulation of electricity and gas markets is a matter for the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) which is an independent regulator under domestic and EU regulatory legislation accountable to a Committee of the Oireachtas. Among the CRU's responsibilities is that of consumer protection and, given

that statutory function, the CRU has pro actively taken several measures to protect domestic consumers in light of the Covid-19 pandemic:

1. One very significant measure is the temporary moratorium on all domestic electricity and gas disconnections until 16 June 2020, prior to which the CRU will further assess the situation.

2. Another measure CRU has taken is to increase emergency credit levels for all gas domestic prepayment customers from €10 to €100, as such customers do not have the options that electricity prepayment customers have, to purchase credit online or over the phone.

3. In general where domestic customers have difficulty paying their electricity or gas bill CRU advises that customers should contact their supplier and seek to come to agreement on a payment plan. The CRU requires suppliers to arrange practical payment plans to assist these customers who have built up arrears and such arrangements must take into account the customer's circumstances and must be reasonable and affordable.

4. As regards non-domestic customers, CRU has recently implemented a temporary supply suspension scheme for those impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. The scheme is available to Small and Medium Enterprises (SME's) that have been closed due to COVID-19 restrictions. Any customer who opts to enter the scheme will have no energy or network charges billed for their business premises supply point for the duration that the measure is in place.

To further assist customers who are concerned about paying their electricity or gas bill during this time, CRU has provided a suite of useful information on their website which can be accessed at www.cru.ie/home/about-cru/energy/difficulty-paying-your-bill-covid-19/ and which is updated on an ongoing basis. The CRU has indicated that it is continuing to monitor the market and will take action where appropriate to protect customers.

The Deputy may wish to note that CRU provide a dedicated email address for Oireachtas members, which enables them raise questions directly to CRU at oireachtas@cru.ie for timely direct reply.

Electricity Generation

945. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the amount of coal imported from a mine (details supplied) in 2019 for use in the Moneypoint power station; if his attention has been drawn to the reputation of the mine for the destruction of the environment, forcible displacement of indigenous people and Afro-Colombians living in the area and workers' rights abuses including harassment and threats of community and human rights defenders from state forces; if his attention has been further drawn to the fact that the mine has continued uninterrupted operation during the Covid-19 crisis, placing workers and their families at great risk; his plans to seek coal elsewhere while Moneypoint remains open; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6787/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The procurement of fuels for ESB power stations is an operational matter for ESB and not one in which I, as Minister, have a statutory function. However, I do wish to address the concerns raised.

I can confirm that ESB has not received coal from the Cerrejón mine since 2018.

The government in the Climate Action Plan has committed to the complete phase out of coal and peat in the generation of electricity.

Since 2015, the amount of coal burned to generate electricity has reduced by 85% and this has contributed to a 13% reduction in green house gases in Ireland since 2005.

I am fully aware of the concerns expressed in relation to the Cerrejón mine. ESB joined Bettercoal, an organisation established by coal buyers to work towards a globally responsible coal supply, in 2014 as part of their commitment to use responsibly sourced coal. I understand that Bettercoal, following an assessment of the Cerrejón mine which indicated that the mine's operating principles are essentially in line with the Bettercoal best practice code, introduced a Continuous Improvement Plan for the mine and assesses progress against this on an ongoing basis.

The Tánaiste has confirmed that our Embassy in Colombia visited the La Guajira region in September 2019, meeting with stakeholders, including local communities, Cerrejón management, local government, and civic leaders.

The Embassy reported that there are a range of complex issues and challenges in the region and that there is a lack of trust between the local authorities, communities, and the mine. They concluded that efforts should be made to improve communication between the local communities and the mine and recommended that these communities should be included in plans for the closure of the mine by 2033, to ensure the delivery of a just transition for the region. The Embassy engaged with national Government, NGO partners, and Cerrejón management to share feedback and continue to monitor the situation.

The Embassy understands that measures have been put in place by Cerrejón management to ensure a safe work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, with all but essential operations ceased. According to the mine company a number of protocols regarding the protection of workers have also been introduced.

Print Media

946. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment his plans to further support local newspapers that are being forced to enter into liquidation as a result of loss of revenue due to Covid-19. [6843/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I have no statutory function in relation to newspapers other than in respect of media mergers.

Telecommunications Services

947. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the steps taken by the mobile telephone service providers and landline service providers to ease access to complaints, payment of bills or other administrative changes during the Covid-19 crisis; if urgent arrangements will be put in place to ensure the availability of a person other than automated systems to deal with urgent inquires; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6878/20]

948. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if arrangements have been made by his Department and broadband service providers to improve broadband services for customers required to work from home due to Covid-19 restrictions and living in areas of limited access to broadband; and if he will make a

statement on the matter. [6879/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 947 and 948 together.

I recognise how vital telecommunications services are to citizens for so many aspects of their daily lives, including remote working, studying and staying in touch with family members during the Covid-19 crisis. I and my officials are also very focussed on the need to ensure that telecommunications customers are sympathetically treated at this very challenging time. In that regard, officials from my Department have been engaging intensively with ComReg and with telecommunications industry.

As the Deputy may be aware, I recently signed regulations enabling ComReg to release additional rights of use for radio spectrum on a temporary basis. This will provide flexibility for mobile network operators to create additional capacity for mobile phone and broadband services and accommodate the increased demand at this time.

In addition, on 15th of April 2020, I announced that all major telecommunications providers have committed to a number of measures to help people stay in touch, study and work from home during Covid 19 including:

1. Any fixed broadband customers who do not have unlimited usage already as standard will be given the opportunity, if they require, to upgrade their package (which may be on a temporary basis), with their current service provider.

2. Any customer who does not have fixed broadband and who relies solely on mobile access to the Internet will have the opportunity to avail of affordable unlimited mobile data access/package from their service provider.

3. Fair usage policies will not be automatically applied to unlimited fixed and mobile data packages.

4. Service providers may implement appropriate permitted traffic management measures to avoid network congestion.

5. Access to healthcare and educational resource websites identified by the Government will be zero-rated for all customers where technically feasible.

6. So that customers can remain connected during the crisis, service providers will engage with any customer that contacts them who is in financial difficulty as a result of Covid-19 and has difficulty paying their bills to agree the best way of keeping them connected to voice and data.

7. Service Providers will work with ComReg in the event of complaints raised to ComReg by consumers, who consider they are not being treated in accordance with these commitments.

In addition to these measures, operators have also independently implemented further supports for consumers, with a number of operators recently announcing a range of packages providing unlimited data with one operator removing all limits on calls, text and data.

Telecommunications service providers, are regulated by the Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg), which operates independently of my Department. The telecommunications regulatory framework which ComReg implements, requires each provider to establish and operate a code of practice, including requirements for complaint handling. Service Providers must implement these measures, at a minimum, to assist consumers (including busi-

nesses) when they need to contact them with a complaint. A copy of the code of practice, which includes the three ways in which consumers can contact service providers, can be accessed at: <https://www.comreg.ie/code-practice-handling-complaints/>. Any operator failing to comply with any of these requirements is a matter to be pursued by ComReg.

In relation to the use of automated services, the majority of operators use an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) to route calls to the relevant customer support area. Many of the IVRs also advise on the current call waiting times. The majority of operators also offer on-line and web chat functions for speedy resolution of standard queries, in addition to non-automated query handling as appropriate.

As mentioned above, Service Providers have committed to engaging with any customer that contacts them who is in financial difficulty as a result of Covid-19 and has difficulty paying their bills to agree the best way of keeping them connected to voice and data. Furthermore, Service Providers have also committed to working with ComReg in the event of complaints raised to ComReg by consumers, who consider they are not being treated in accordance with Covid-19 commitments.

Departmental Programmes

949. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if funding for the getting citizens online grant scheme has been cancelled; if so, the impact on providers that were part way through the scheme; his plans for a modified programme to be established in view of the increased need to get older persons online due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6950/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Digital Skills for Citizens Scheme provides digital skills training for people who have never used the internet with a view to removing a key barrier to digital adoption. Since 2017 over 57,000 people have participated in training under the Scheme.

All organisations delivering digital skills training under the Scheme have been pre-funded to train a specific number of people in line with their respective grant agreements. The ability to deliver training classes has necessarily been impacted by Covid-19 pandemic. My officials will work with these organisations to find safe solutions which comply with public health guidance, to afford them the opportunity to deliver training and meet their targets.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to provide support and opportunities to empower everyone to get online. With this in mind the future path of the Scheme is currently under consideration by my Department.

Energy Efficiency

950. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the action he is taking to ensure better home energy savings from investment in home energy efficiency schemes; the measures being implemented on foot of the report from the European Court of Auditors on the use of EU finance for energy efficiency programmes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7000/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): My Department funds a number of SEAI grant schemes to help homeowners to im-

prove the energy efficiency of their properties. Since 2000, approximately 400,000 homeowners have upgraded their homes with support from these schemes. This has resulted in warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes that are easier to heat and light. Approximately €120 million has been allocated to residential and community energy efficiency schemes in 2020. The SEAI and Department monitor the impact of the schemes on an ongoing basis.

A recently published audit conducted by the European Court of Auditors assessed whether EU co-funded energy efficiency investments in buildings, including under Ireland's Warmer Homes Scheme, had cost-effectively helped the EU toward its 2020 energy saving target. The primary aim of the Warmer Homes Scheme is to address energy poverty by delivering energy efficiency measures to those homeowners deemed to be in, or at risk of, such poverty. The programme delivers many benefits to homeowners including improved comfort, quality of life, and health. Since 2000, the scheme has provided upgrades to over 142,000 homes across Ireland, improving the lives of some of Ireland's most vulnerable citizens. The Scheme underwent a significant change in mid-2018, expanding to include more extensive measures, including external wall insulation which is now funded under the scheme. This has resulted in deeper retrofits and greater energy savings for homeowners. In 2018, 77% of homes upgraded under the scheme saw at least one energy consumption classification change.

It is important to note that the scope of the Court of Auditors report addresses EU funding of the scheme over the period 2014-2018 in terms of energy efficiency only and not other benefits such as energy poverty reductions, which is the primary aim of the scheme. Furthermore, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is currently undertaking a social impact assessment of the SEAI's energy poverty schemes, including the Warmer Homes Scheme.

The Climate Action Plan sets an ambitious target of 500,000 energy efficiency retrofits by 2030. Achievement of this target will be supported by the Project Ireland 2040 allocation of €3.7 billion as well as the range of measures identified in the Plan. To deliver our target, a Retrofit Taskforce has been established which will develop a plan to implement a new retrofitting delivery model. The target for development of the plan is Q3 2020. The audit findings will be considered in the context of the reform and development of energy efficiency schemes.

Departmental Contracts

951. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the amount spent on external consultants by his Department in 2019; the average hourly rate; if caps or limits on such spending are in place; the way in which conflicts of interest are managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7276/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): My Department's remit includes complex policy areas, oversight of State regulation and service provision across key strategic services such as energy, environment, climate change and public broadcasting, as well as regulation of sectors such as mining and hydrocarbon exploration. Given the technical complexity, economic significance and community interest in these areas, there is a requirement to disseminate information and to address specific issues as they arise. My Department therefore necessarily incurs some expenditure on consultancies from time to time.

In procuring these services, my Department always seeks to ensure value for money and to keep expenditure to the minimum necessary. Any conflicts of interest are managed in accordance with appointment and contractual provisions. All contracts are procured and delivered in line with procurement best practice.

The details of these consultancies are outlined in the table at the link. The majority of the contracts awarded by my Department are on a fixed rate basis and no hourly breakdown is available. In some instances such specific details are commercially sensitive and subject to contract. Spending is managed in line with the specific appointment and contractual provisions applying.

[External Consultants]

Travel Trade Sector

952. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the steps he will take to ensure that persons do not lose out financially if a no travel advisory is issued in cases in which airlines do not cancel flights; his views on whether persons requested to adhere to the advice should not be punished financially with the cost of forgone flights; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5554/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The law is clear in circumstances where an airline cancels a flight - for whatever reason - that all passengers booked on that flight who seek it are entitled to a full cash refund within 7 days. That provision is set out in EU Regulation 261 (2004). Notwithstanding the constraints arising from the COVID pandemic, a small number of flights are continuing to be operated. Where a flight takes place there is nothing in the law that entitles a passenger to a refund from an airline.

My understanding is that the current practice of the two main Irish airlines serving the Irish market is to offer the opportunity to rebook a flight for later in the year or receive a voucher. I am not aware that people are losing out entirely in these circumstances.

Company Closures

953. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will assist the creditors of a company (details supplied) in particular those who applied for their J1 programme through the company and are now out of pocket; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5588/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): There are insolvency protection arrangements in place for customers of tour operators and travel agents licensed to trade in Ireland. These arrangements are administered by the Commission for Aviation Regulation. The measures include provision for the repatriation of stranded travellers and reimbursements for travel not undertaken.

Customers of the company in question may be covered by the consumer protection scheme if they purchased a package that includes overseas travel.

The customers of the company must complete the relevant claim form and supply supporting documentation as set out in the Commission's notice, available on its Web site at <https://www.aviationreg.ie>. For customers of this company, claims must be submitted by 26 May 2020. The Commission will then assess these claims to determine any amount due to the claimant.

Motor Tax

954. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will consider refunding a portion of the motor tax to vehicle owners who have had limited or no need to use their vehicles over the course of the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5635/20]

974. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if a refund of motor tax prepaid by those who subsequently were advised to cocoon has been considered; and if so, if such a refund can be issued for the months in which Covid-19 restrictions are in place. [5690/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 954 and 974 together.

There are no plans to amend the legislation to extend the grounds for the granting of a refund of motor tax at this time.

The legislation which sets out the circumstances for refunds of motor tax provides for refunds only in certain limited circumstances, namely where:

- a vehicle has been scrapped or destroyed;
- a vehicle has been permanently exported;
- a vehicle has been stolen and has not been recovered by the owner;
- a vehicle in respect of which a tax disc has been taken out has not been used in a public place at any time since the issue of the disc;
- the owner of a vehicle has ceased, because of illness, injury or other physical disability, to use the vehicle;
- the owner of a vehicle has ceased, because of absence from the state for business or educational purposes, to use the vehicle; or
- the owner of a vehicle has ceased, because of service overseas with the Defence Forces, to use the vehicle.

In order to obtain a refund, there must also be a minimum of three months remaining on a disc at the time of surrender of the disc to the licensing authority.

However, I wish to advise that there is a facility in place to declare a vehicle off the road.

The Non-Use of Motor Vehicles Act 2013, as amended, provides for a system of declaring vehicles off the road in advance. A declaration must be made in the last month of an existing motor tax disc or a previously made declaration of non-use. The declaration can be made online or in a motor tax office, and can be made for any number of calendar months between 3 and 12 months i.e. it cannot be made for a period of 1 or 2 months. If a vehicle is subsequently required to be put back on the road, the declaration can be broken at any time simply by taxing the vehicle.

Airlines Regulations

955. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the recourse available to consumers to ensure the right to full refunds when airlines cancel flights in view of Covid-19; the consumer statutory entitlements under Irish and EU laws in this area; and the

appropriate State body and-or Department that has the lead remit in this area. [5681/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Consumer protections for airline passengers and for holiday-makers who book trips through travel agents and tour operators are enshrined in EU law. EU Regulation 261/2004 requires airlines to provide a full cash refund within 7 days in the event that a flight is cancelled by the airline; and EU Directive 2302/2015 on Package Travel requires travel agents and tour operators to provide a full cash refund within 14 days in the event that a package holiday is cancelled, by either the customer or the holiday provider.

The Commission for Aviation Regulation, which is an independent statutory body under my remit, has responsibility for enforcing airline refund obligations in Ireland, and I understand that the Commission recently wrote to all airlines operating routes that service Ireland, reminding them of their legal obligations to provide refunds for cancelled bookings. I am aware that there are significant delays making refunds, and while I can appreciate that there are genuine administrative challenges dealing with the unprecedented level of cancellations, the legal obligation to provide a refund is clear and unchanged. Anyone having difficulties securing a refund should contact the Commission. Further advice is available on its dedicated passenger rights website www.flightrights.ie.

With respect to consumer rights under the Package Travel Directive, where customers of travel agents and/or tour operators are not receiving requested refunds, then they have recourse to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission.

Student Visas

956. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the recourse students have to refunds with regard to J1 visa packages booked further to a provider (details supplied) going into provisional liquidation; the consumer statutory entitlements under Irish and EU laws in this area; and the appropriate State body and Department that has the lead remit in this area. [5684/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Commission for Aviation Regulation is the statutory body with responsibility for administering the insolvency protection scheme to repatriate and reimburse consumers in the event of a licensed travel agent or tour operator collapse. Customers may be covered by the consumer protection scheme if they purchased a package from the company in question and this package includes overseas travel. They may also be covered if they bought travel (alone) commencing in Ireland.

The customers of the Company should complete the relevant claim form and supply supporting documentation as set out in the Commission's notice at <https://www.aviationreg.ie/welcome-to-the-commission-for-aviation-regulation-ireland/travel-business-collapse-information-and-claim-forms.960.html>. For customers of this Company, claims must be submitted by 26 May 2020. The Commission will then assess these claims to determine the amount due to the claimant.

Sport and Recreational Development

957. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the stage at which persons working in water sports can recommence work; if consideration has been given to persons that teach water sports with regard to the easing of restrictions for outdoor

workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5889/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The stage at which persons working in water sports can recommence work is dependent on the specific characteristics of the water sport concerned, for example whether it occurs indoors or outdoors, as these determine the applicable phase of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

Phase 1 of the Roadmap, which commenced on 18 May, permits certain outdoor sports and physical activities in groups of no more than 4 people, all of whom may not travel further than 5km from their homes, and where social distancing can be maintained. Angling, open water swimming, sailing, rowing and canoeing are included in this category and can recommence in accordance with the prevailing restrictions with effect from the 18th of May.

Sport and Recreational Development

958. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if persons that teach water sports have been considered with regard to the easing of restrictions for those that work outdoors; the stage at which those working in water sports can commence work again; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5890/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The stage at which those working in water sports can commence work again is dependent on the specific characteristics of the water sport concerned, for example whether it occurs indoors or outdoors, as these determine the applicable phase of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

Phase 1 of the Roadmap, which commenced on 18 May, permits certain outdoor sports and physical activities in groups of no more than 4 people, all of whom may not travel further than 5km from their homes, and where social distancing can be maintained. Angling, open water swimming, sailing, rowing and canoeing are included in this category and can recommence in accordance with the prevailing restrictions with effect from the 18th of May.

Other water sports are scheduled to recommence in accordance with the phasing laid down in the Roadmap, subject to the prevailing public health advice at that time.

Although I have no specific function to exercise in relation to water safety, I would emphasise the importance of members of the public exercising caution if engaged in water sports such as open water swimming for example. Lifeguards may not be present on beaches to the same extent as in ordinary circumstances, and many swimming spots may in fact be closed off to prevent gatherings.

Covid-19 Pandemic

959. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if clarity will be provided in relation to the measures that need to be taken by restaurants, cafés, publicans and hotels in phase 4 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business from 20 July 2020 onwards (details supplied). [6319/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): With regard to the types of businesses mentioned by the Deputy and in line with the sequence of actions detailed in the ‘Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business’, Phase 3 should see cafés and restaurants reopening, with hotels (but not hotel bars) due to follow in Phase 4 and pubs/bars scheduled for reopening in Phase 5. In this regard, Fáilte Ireland is

currently preparing guidelines for the tourism sector, in consultation with the tourism industry and relevant authorities.

I have referred the Deputy's question to Fáilte Ireland to supply any further relevant detail directly to the Deputy, including anything specific to the issues raised in the details the Deputy supplied. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Roads Maintenance Funding

960. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the funding streams available to local authorities for bridge repairs. [6578/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority, in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from local authorities' own resources supplemented by State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the local authority.

The Regional and Local Roads Division in my Department operates a Bridge Rehabilitation programme which allows local authorities to apply each year for monies to undertake bridge rehabilitation works. It is also open to local authorities to apply for funding under the terms of the Specific Improvement Grant programme.

Alternatively, councils in receipt of the Department's Discretionary Grant can choose to spend these monies for improvements and maintenance works. Councils have discretion in spending these grants provided the works meet the eligibility criteria set by the Department.

As Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and securing capital funding in relation to the national roads programme. Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 the planning, design, and construction, including the distribution and management of funding for national roads, is a matter for TII in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

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

Airport Passenger Data

961. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of passengers that arrived in airports in April 2020. [6926/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The following table shows the number of passengers that arrived at Irish Airports on scheduled passenger services in April, 2020. The numbers given include transfer/transit passengers for whom the airport listed is not their final destination.

Arrivals at Irish Airports April 2020

Airport	Passenger Arrivals	Transfer/Transit Passengers	Total
Dublin Airport	11,436	3,545	14,981

Airport	Passenger Arrivals	Transfer/Transit Passengers	Total
Cork Airport	694	0	694
Shannon Airport	50	4,175	4225
Kerry Airport	62	0	62
Donegal Airport	56	0	56
Ireland West Airport Knock	0	0	0
Total	12,298	7,720	20,018

Ports Traffic

962. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of passengers that arrived in seaports in April 2020. [6927/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Upon request by my Department the Irish Maritime Development Office (IMDO) have been collecting weekly figures of passenger arrivals and departures through Irish ports since the beginning of April.

These figures are outlined below and represent combined arrival and departure numbers.

On average, there tends to be an even divide between arrival and departure numbers but a precise breakdown will be available from the CSO in the coming weeks.

30th March to 3rd May (5 Weeks)

Central Corridor 8,035

Southern Corridor 1,433

Continental Corridor 3,055

Total 12,523

This represents a 95.6% reduction in passengers numbers on the same weeks last year.

Central corridor (sailings from Dublin to Heysham, Liverpool and Holyhead)

Southern Corridor (sailings from Rosslare to Pembroke and Fishguard)

Continental Corridor (sailings from Ireland to the European Continent)

For the duration of the crisis the CSO will be publishing monthly Air and Sea Travel Statistics. The March figures were released on Wednesday May 13th 2020. This release will publish the total number of persons arriving in Ireland from overseas and departing Ireland for overseas destinations. This information will be broken down by mode (air or sea), route (cross-channel, continental, etc.) and staging country.

Departmental Contracts

963. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his Department has engaged the use of external consultants from 1 January 2020 to date; the details and costs of such engagements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5538/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The information requested by the Deputy is currently being collated by my officials and will be forwarded to the Deputy within 10 working days.

Driver Test

964. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when it is planned that driving instructors will resume work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5547/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Driving instruction is given by instructors who are private individuals who are self employed or employed by a Driving School. As they are not employees of the Road Safety Authority individual instructors and driving schools should refer to the roadmap and to the National Return to Work Safely Protocol, noting that high-risk services are not to resume until Phase 4 at the earliest.

The Road Safety Authority (RSA), in consultation with my Department, and subject to the advice of the health authorities, is currently putting together a plan for the resumption of its services, including the carrying out of driving tests and the issuing of driving licenses and learner permits. This plan is being developed in line with the roadmap and with the National Return to Work Safely Protocol.

Road Projects Status

965. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of the N5 national primary route between Ballaghaderreen and Scramoge road project, and if the project will proceed as planned. [5558/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

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

Road Projects Status

966. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when landowners that will be affected by the N5 national primary route between Ballaghaderreen and Scramoge road project and that have entered into purchase agreements can expect to receive payment for their land. [5559/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. Once funding arrangements have been put in place with Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, the planning/design, the purchase of lands and construction of individual national roads is a matter for TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

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

Air Services Provision

967. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if the Shannon to Heathrow service will be resumed; the timeline for resumption; if an airline (details supplied) has signalled to his Department that such flights will resume albeit with social distancing; if commercial passenger activity more generally at Shannon Airport will resume soon; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5570/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): There are currently no flight restrictions in place in Ireland and the operation of the London Heathrow route, or any route from Shannon, is a commercial decision for airlines, in consultation with the airport and other stakeholders.

Aer Lingus entered into certain commitments at the time of its acquisition by IAG in 2015 in relation to the operation of its London Heathrow slots. These commitments are, however, subject to certain force majeure provisions, which are defined to include an “epidemic or pandemic”. The reduction in Aer Lingus frequencies to London Heathrow is therefore in accordance with these provisions.

Aer Lingus has advised my Department that it will keep its schedule under review having regard to the changing circumstances.

Vehicle Testing

968. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when NCTs, DOEs and CVRTs will resume; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5619/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time and as in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis my Department continues to be guided by National Public Health Emergency Team and the relevant national experts in relation to the resumption of services.

My officials and the Road Safety Authority are currently examining the possibility of resuming National Car Test services in light of the roadmap and the national return to work protocols published by government. I hope to make a statement on this matter in the coming weeks.

I am pleased to tell you that Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness (CVR) testing resumed on 18 May 2020, initially only for those vehicles with a test due date prior to 28 March 2020 (i.e. for vehicles that did not benefit from the three-month extension to certificates of roadworthiness). CVR testing is expected to resume fully over the following weeks for those vehicles with a test due date on or after 28 March 2020.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

969. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the action he will take in response to the concerns and proposals of a trade union (details supplied) for protecting maritime workers from the long-term economic impact of the Covid-19

crisis. [5622/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The safeguarding of workers rights, including those in the maritime sector, is primarily a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation

The employment of seafarers and workers and the nationality of those workers is an operational matter for the shipping companies themselves as they are independent commercial companies and I have no role in the matter.

In the case of workers employed on Irish registered vessels, the working and living conditions of those employees on the vessel are subject to the provisions of Irish law.

However, the shipping companies referred to by the Deputy have no vessels on the Irish Flag. The rates of pay and working and living conditions of workers on board vessels registered in other States are governed by the flag State's legislation and are a matter for that flag state and the internal domestic law of that country.

Given the negative economic impact of COVID-19, many companies across all sectors, including the port and shipping sector which is experiencing significant reductions in trade, are having to consider restructuring and other cost saving measures in order to re-align their business to match reduced demand.

Tourism Funding

970. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the measures he plans to implement to support struggling small businesses in the tourism sector that are likely facing into a summer in which they will have little to no trading in their busiest and most lucrative time of year. [5643/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): My Department has liaised with other Government departments and industry representative bodies, to align the economy wide COVID-19 supports and initiatives with tourism and hospitality needs.

The measures put in place by the Government to support businesses initially focused on supporting those who have lost their jobs and in supporting businesses to remain viable during this difficult time with specifically targeted supports to assist companies to stay operational and retain their staff.

As a result, many tourism businesses are now availing the various cross-sectoral economic supports that the Government has already put in place such as; the wage subsidy scheme, increased unemployment benefits, the state credit guarantee scheme, working capital loan schemes, enterprise support schemes and deferrals of tax liabilities, VAT, social contributions and local authority rates.

Fáilte Ireland has set up a COVID-19 Industry Advisory Group which meets weekly. The purpose of this group is to provide support to the tourism industry and to facilitate the timely sharing of information and insights to help improve the sector's understanding and response to the crisis. Fáilte Ireland has also developed a COVID-19 Business Support Hub which offers a suite of targeted supports for tourism businesses including a series of webinars from experts in each field, as well as advice guides with detailed FAQs and templates where necessary.

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On 1st May, the Government published a Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business to ease the COVID-19 restrictions and reopen Ireland's economy in a phased manner. In this regard Fáilte Ireland, in conjunction with the relevant authorities, is currently preparing guidelines for the tourism sector.

Minister Ross and I have appointed a Tourism Recovery Taskforce to prepare a Tourism Recovery Plan which will include a set of recommendations on how best the Irish tourism sector can adapt and recover in the changed tourism environment as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. The plan will identify priority aims, key enablers and market opportunities for the sector for the period 2020-2023. The Taskforce may consult with stakeholders to inform its deliberations and report back this year. The membership of the Taskforce is available on my Department's website.

Driver Test

971. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when driving instructors can return to work (details supplied). [5651/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Driving instruction is provided by instructors who are private individuals either self employed or who are employed by Driving Schools. They are not employees of the Road Safety Authority. Individual driving instructors and Driving School businesses should refer to the roadmap and to the National Return to Work Safely Protocol, noting that high-risk services are not to resume until Phase 4 at the earliest.

The Road Safety Authority (RSA), in consultation with my Department, and subject to the advice of the health authorities, is currently putting together a plan for the resumption of its services, including the carrying out of driving tests and the issuing of driving licenses and learner permits. This plan is being developed in line with the roadmap and with the National Return to Work Safely Protocol.

I have no function in relation to social welfare matters or employment services, including the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and questions on these issues should be addressed to my colleague, Regina Doherty, Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

Bus Services

972. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has engaged with a union (details supplied) regarding the cash collection regime on bus services; and if consideration has been given to adopting a no cash approach to protect drivers. [5659/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Government has been clear that continued operation of the public transport sector is important, and it has been designated among the essential services that are to carry on. I would like to thank operators and staff for their continued dedication to providing this vital service in such challenging times. I have not engaged with the National Bus and Rail Union on the issue of the cash collection regime on bus services.

A number of measures have been introduced across the system, guided by public health advice, to ensure the continued operation of services during the pandemic, including enhanced cleaning regimes and social distancing measures across the network. My Department is engag-

ing directly with the National Transport Authority (NTA) in relation to these measures and the NTA is coordinating the response of public transport operators.

Accordingly, I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Road Network

973. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has engaged with local authorities regarding the extension of footpaths and the creation of temporary cycle lanes in towns and cities nationwide; and if supports will be provided to implement measures which support social distancing. [5660/20]

1070. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to ensure pedestrians, cyclists and those with limited mobility can move safely through towns and cities during the Covid-19 pandemic; his views on a general scheme of cycle and walkway installation and or improvement and footpath widening; the details of this scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6760/20]

1092. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if additional funding will be provided to facilitate measures to support additional space and social distancing for cycling and walking; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6997/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 973, 1070 and 1092 together.

I can inform the Deputies that the National Transport Authority (NTA) is working with local authorities to develop COVID Mobility Frameworks for each of the cities.

These Frameworks will set out specific plans to deliver improvements such as

- Widened footpaths
- Temporary protected cycle facilities, including new contra-flow routes
- Revised bus routings and bus priority measures; and
- Enhanced pedestrian priority zones.

The first of these Frameworks is being developed with Dublin City Council and it is intended that similar plans will be implemented in Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford and I can confirm that relevant works identified will be funded through the NTA under my Department's Sustainable Mobility Investment Programme.

I understand that the initial draft of the Dublin City plan will be available this week and it will set out the measures that will put in place in the coming weeks and months to facilitate the reopening of society and business generally.

I expect the situation will be kept under review by the NTA and the local authorities in the coming weeks and months and any plans developed now will be subject to amendment as required.

Question No. 974 answered with Question No. 954.

Driver Test

975. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the arrangements in place to provide persons with provisional dates for when they can take their driver test (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5718/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The driving test, like other public services provided by the Road Safety Authority (RSA), has been temporarily closed for public health reasons during the COVID crisis.

The RSA undertook the appropriate risk assessments and is satisfied that it cannot, bearing in mind its responsibility for the health and safety of its employees and the general public, undertake category B (car) driving tests on an emergency basis at this time. In particular, a driver tester would be required to be within a two metre distance continuously for a period in excess of 20 minutes. They have looked at a number of approaches to mitigate this but have not identified a means to do within the public health guidance in force, and regrettably they have been unable to carry out car driving tests on an emergency basis.

However, it may be possible to carry out driving tests in other categories of vehicles, like ambulances or buses, and the RSA assesses these on a case-by-case basis.

The RSA is currently working, in consultation with my Department, on plans for the resumption of the range of public services and functions for which it is responsible, following the publications of the Government roadmap and, more recently, the National Return to Work Safely Protocol agreed by employer and trade union representatives. Until a date has been agreed with the relevant authorities whereby driver testing can be carried out safely and in accordance with the public health requirements, there is little point in providing provisional test dates. The RSA has always provided urgent tests where the circumstances warrant it, and I expect this to be the case when the service is allowed to reopen.

Covid-19 Pandemic

976. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the phase of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business the NCT, CVRT, driver tests and licences fall under. [5727/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis. My Department is guided by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and national experts in relation to the resumption of services.

My officials and the Road Safety Authority (RSA) are currently examining the possibility and appropriate timing of resuming the range of services and legal functions for which the RSA is responsible, in light of the roadmap recently published by Government and the National Return to Work Safely Protocol agreed by the employers and trade unions.

I am pleased to say that CVR testing resumed on 18 May 2020, initially for those vehicles with a test due date prior to 28 March 2020 (when the new Regulations came into effect), who did not benefit from the four-month extension. CVR testing generally will resume in subsequent weeks, including for those vehicles with a test due date from 28 March 2020.

I hope to make further announcements in relation to the other services, subject to satisfactory progress in relation to public health requirements, over the coming weeks.

Rail Network

977. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans for the Waterford to Limerick rail line which closed temporarily due to the measures taken to tackle Covid-19; when it is planned to reopen the line; his further plans to maintain this service into the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5775/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport.

The issue raised is an operational matter for Iarnród Éireann, in conjunction with the National Transport Authority, and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply.

Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Vehicle Testing

978. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the schedule for the reopening of the NCT test centres nationwide; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5777/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As the safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis, my Department continues to be guided by National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and national experts in relation to the resumption of services.

My officials and the Road Safety Authority (RSA) are currently examining the possibility of resuming roadworthiness testing services in light of the roadmap recently published by Government and the National Return to Work Safely Protocol agreed by the employer and trade union representatives.

I hope to make further announcements in relation to these matters, subject to satisfactory developments in relation to public health, over the coming weeks.

Motor Tax

979. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if motor tax will be temporarily suspended or reduced for persons aged 70 years of age and over (details supplied). [5779/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): There are no plans currently to suspend or reduce motor tax. The Government has urged those over the age of 70 (and also those who have underlying medical conditions) to cocoon and to continue to follow public health advice. While everyone should stay at home as much as possible, older people may leave their home for exercise and to drive for up to 5 kilometres.

I wish to advise that there is a facility in place to declare a vehicle off the road if a vehicle is not in use. The Non-Use of Motor Vehicles Act 2013, as amended, provides for a system of declaring vehicles off the road in advance for motor tax purposes. The declaration must be made in the last month of an existing motor tax disc or renewed in the last month of a previously made

declaration of non-use. The declaration can be made online or in a motor tax office.

The declaration can be made for any number of calendar months between 3 and 12 months i.e. it cannot be made for a period of 1 or 2 months. If a vehicle is subsequently required to be put back on the road, the declaration can be broken at any time simply by taxing the vehicle.

Travel Trade Sector

980. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the actions and negotiations being held with regard to persons that have booked foreign holidays during the summer (details supplied). [5781/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The law is clear in circumstances where an airline cancels a flight - for whatever reason - that all passengers booked on that flight are entitled to a full cash refund within 7 days. That provision is set out in EU Regulation 261 (2004). Notwithstanding the constraints arising from the COVID pandemic, a small number of flights are continuing to be operated. Where a flight takes place there is nothing in the law that entitles a passenger to a refund from an airline.

My understanding is that the current practice of the two main Irish airlines serving the Irish market is to offer the opportunity to rebook a flight for later in the year or receive a voucher. I am not aware that people are losing out entirely in these circumstances.

Tourism Policy

981. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if clarity will be provided for tourism providers on whether overseas visitors can be expected by the end of the year (details supplied). [5783/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Government has released a 5 phase roadmap setting out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions. Phased re-opening commenced on 18 May and is based on a 3 week review process. Detailed information on each phase can be found here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/news/58bc8b-taoiseach-announces-roadmap-for-re-opening-society-and-business-and-u/>.

As the Deputy is aware, the current position is that visitors from overseas need to self-isolate for 14 days upon arrival into Ireland and subsequently abide by the relevant public health advice regarding travel within Ireland. In practical terms, overseas tourism into Ireland will not be feasible until these restrictions are lifted or eased substantially.

The Roadmap notes that "As the process for modifying restrictions proceeds, and as the international situation evolves, we need to continue to work intensively on our approach to travel restrictions and controls at ports and airports...". Along with my officials, I will continue to engage with my colleagues in Government to ensure that as much certainty can be provided in respect of international travel and tourism into Ireland as soon as circumstances allow.

State Airports

982. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if provisions are being made to support Shannon Airport post-Covid-19 (details supplied). [5788/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I would like to thank the Deputy for his question in relation to Covid-19 and Shannon Airport. Covid-19 has had a profound and unparalleled impact on the aviation industry. In Europe, aviation movements have plummeted by about 90% while passenger traffic is 99% below comparable periods last year.

In response to Covid-19, the Government has put in place a broad range of supports to help mitigate the effects of the crisis on our citizens and businesses. One such support is the COVID-19 Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme. This Scheme allows employers to continue to pay their employees during the COVID-19 emergency. It aims, as we know, to keep employees registered with their employers, so that they will be able to get back to work quickly after the pandemic. Shannon Group is availing of this Scheme.

Details of the suite of Covid-19 Government Funding and Supports available have been notified to Shannon Group, including, the Working Capital Loan Scheme - a €200m Working Capital scheme for eligible businesses impacted by COVID-19; the Enterprise Support Scheme, under which a €200m package is available from Enterprise Ireland's COVID-19 Business Response Plan; Fáilte Ireland's COVID-19 Business Support Hub which offers a suite of targeted supports for tourism businesses and a range of Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, Local Enterprise Ireland, grant supports are available to firms to help with strategies to innovate, diversify markets and supply chains and to improve competitiveness.

On 13 May 2020, the European Commission published a package of guidelines and recommendations to help Member States gradually lift travel restrictions while respecting necessary health precautions. Officials in my Department are currently assessing these Guidelines together with further complementary draft guidance developed by the European Aviation Safety Agency. There is an ongoing process of consultation with stakeholders, including Shannon Airport, in the context of providing a means to allow industry to prepare the return to operations as soon as possible.

I fully appreciate and acknowledge the important role of Shannon Airport to the economy of the Midwest region and indeed nationally. My Department continues to work closely with Shannon Group to ensure that the Company, including Shannon Airport, will be well positioned operationally to contribute to the post pandemic recovery.

Driver Test

983. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when driving lessons and driver tests are likely to resume, particularly for persons in circumstances in which a car is necessary for work, under the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. [5792/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis. My Department is guided by National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and national experts in relation to the resumption of services.

Driving instruction is provided by Instructors who are private individuals either self employed or who are employed by a Driving School.

The RSA cannot issue medical guidance to Approved Driving Instructors (ADI) on COVID 19 and how they operate their businesses. As they are not Road Safety Authority (RSA) employees, ADIs should protect themselves, their families and communities by following the of-

ficial Government guidelines on hygiene and social distancing. As mostly sole traders each ADI has an individual responsibility for their own welfare and that of their families and customers.

My officials and the Road Safety Authority (RSA) are working together on examining the possibility of resumption of the driving tests and other services as soon as is possible in light of the roadmap published by Government and the National Return to Work Safety Protocol. However, the driving test raises problems in terms of compliance with the Protocol in particular social distancing rules which requires the tester and the candidate to be within a 2 metres distance continuously for a period in excess of 20 minutes, in a confined space, which is not in itself a workspace under the control of the RSA.

Bearing this in mind, car driver testing may not be able to resume until in or after Phase 5 of the Government's roadmap.

Sports Events

984. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will examine correspondence from a person (details supplied); the position regarding the planned American football match for the Aviva Stadium in August 2020; if it will be going ahead; and if so, the health considerations being made in this regard in the context of Covid-19. [5812/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As the Deputy will no doubt be aware, all types of mass gatherings have been restricted since 24th March. In order to provide early certainty to promoters of licensable events a decision was taken that all licensable events up to the end of August would not proceed. No decision has yet been taken on sports events, such as the Aer Lingus College Football Classic game scheduled for 29th August 2020. Whatever public health advice applies in August will, of course, be abided by.

The Government's *Roadmap for Reopening Society and Businesses*, published on 1 May, sets out a gradual and stepped plan for easing the COVID-19 restrictions and returning to social and economic activity. It is a flexible framework document which is entirely dependent on our success in suppressing the spread of the COVID-19 virus. In line with this Roadmap and its five-phase plan for easing restrictions, it is envisioned that spectator events that involve mass gatherings might be permitted in Phase 5 but "only in accordance with both indoor and outdoor number restrictions and where social distancing can be complied with".

As the Deputy is aware, the current position is that visitors from overseas need to self-isolate for 14 days upon arrival into Ireland and subsequently abide by the relevant public health advice regarding travel within Ireland.

Covid-19 Pandemic

985. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the discussions that have taken place with hotel representatives on the facilitation of weddings in hotels in view of Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5823/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): The restrictions introduced to limit the spread of Covid-19 have led to the cancellation or deferral of many events and services, including wedding receptions. In many cases where it is not possible to proceed with a wedding reception due to these restrictions, the couple and the hotel will be able to agree on an alternative date and the question of a refund will not arise.

Where a couple have placed a deposit with a hotel or other wedding venue, they have entered into a contract with the hotel or venue concerned. Whether a couple are entitled to a refund of their deposit where it is not possible to reschedule the wedding will depend in the first instance on the terms and conditions of their contract. Couples who find themselves in this situation should first check the terms and conditions of their contract with the hotel or venue, and in particular the terms relating to cancellations and the refund of deposits and other pre-payments. If a term of the contract provides for the refund of deposits in the event of a cancellation, the business may not subsequently change that term without the consumer's agreement. While I fully appreciate that hotels are facing severe financial pressures at present, they should deal fairly with consumers who find it necessary to cancel contracts for weddings or other functions and are seeking a refund of their deposits.

The terms of standard form contracts of the kind that typically govern weddings and other functions are subject to assessment for unfairness under the Regulations on unfair terms in consumer contracts. The aim of the Regulations is to protect consumers against the abuse of power by sellers and suppliers, in particular by means of one-sided contract terms. The Regulations provide for example that among the terms that may be regarded as unfair are terms that permit sellers or suppliers to retain sums paid by the consumer where the latter decides not to perform the contract without providing for the consumer to receive compensation of an equivalent amount from the seller or supplier where the latter is the party cancelling the contract. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC) is responsible for the enforcement of the provisions of the Regulations on the control of unfair terms in standard form consumer contracts. Information on matters relating to consumer contracts, including on cancellations and refunds for wedding and other contracts, can be accessed on the CCPC website at <https://www.ccpc.ie/consumers/covid-19/consumer-contracts/> .

The enormous disruption to commercial activity caused by Covid-19 has thrown up many difficult situations for consumers and businesses. If current consumer law proves not to have provided adequate protection for consumers in these situations, I will consider and, where justified, bring forward proposals to strengthen that law where I can do so without contravening EU consumer protection legislation. Later this year I will publish the Scheme of a comprehensive, consolidated Consumer Rights Bill that will set out rights and remedies for consumer contracts for goods, services, digital content and will include proposals to strengthen the existing provisions on unfair terms in consumer contracts. This Bill will provide an opportunity to address any gaps in consumer protection revealed by the application by businesses of the terms of consumer contracts in cases arising from Covid-19.

Vehicle Testing

986. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the timeline for the re-opening of NCT centres. [5825/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As the safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis, my Department continues to be guided by National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and national experts in relation to the resumption of services.

My officials and the Road Safety Authority (RSA) are currently examining the possibility of resuming roadworthiness testing services in light of the roadmap recently published by Government and the National Return to Work Safely Protocol agreed by the employer and trade union representatives.

I hope to make further announcements in relation to these matters, subject to satisfactory developments in relation to public health, over the coming weeks.

Public Transport Fares

987. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if a partial refund will be issued to persons who purchased annual Leap card tickets at the start of the year but have not been in a position to travel since the Covid-19 restrictions were introduced. [5864/20]

1002. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if there will be a partial refund on yearly Leap card subscriptions due to reduced use during the pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6114/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 987 and 1002 together.

As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport in Ireland. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the regulation of fares in relation to public passenger transport services.

I have, therefore, referred the Deputies questions to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

988. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he received the proposals sent to him by an association (details supplied); and if he will consider adopting the proposals listed in the document to help operators which have experienced a severe downturn due to Covid-19. [5865/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Government has put in place a range of measures to assist businesses during the current COVID-19 pandemic, including a waiver of commercial rates and the COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme. Self-employed owner operators of SPSVs, including limousine operators, may also avail of the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment of €350 a week.

I am aware that the limousine trade is particularly reliant on the tourism and hospitality sector. Since late February officials from my Department have engaged with industry with a view to understanding the challenges facing the sector. In addition, with my colleague, Minister of State Griffin, I have established the COVID-19 Tourism Monitoring Group. This group comprises industry stakeholders, the tourism agencies and Departmental officials and has been specifically established to monitor the disruption to the tourism sector and to assist in formulating the sector's response to the crisis.

We are continuing to liaise with Government colleagues and industry representative bodies, to align the economy wide COVID-19 supports and initiatives with the needs of the tourism and hospitality sector. As a result, many tourism businesses are now availing of the various supports that the Government has already put in place. We are also engaging with the Banking and Payment Federation of Ireland and Insurance Ireland to address issues encountered by tourism businesses. Fáilte Ireland's COVID-19 Business Support Hub also provides a suite of targeted

supports for tourism businesses, to enable them to respond to the challenges and threats now being faced in the sector. Any further measures will be considered in the context of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

Covid-19 Pandemic

989. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the steps he will take to ensure that persons who arrive here by airplane or boat are obliged to give the necessary Covid-19 public health contact information in view of the fact the current voluntary arrangement does not seem robust enough; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5872/20]

1056. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the measures which will put in place to ensure persons arriving here by air or sea are abiding by the Covid-19 health restrictions; if he has considered introducing new regulations to make the current quarantine restrictions mandatory; if he has engaged with the Northern Ireland Executive regarding implementing an all-Ireland policy in this area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6746/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 989 and 1056 together.

The Department of Health is the lead Government Department in relation to public health matters, including COVID-19 and also measures taken at ports and airports in relation to arriving passengers.

Measures to protect public health are decided by the National Emergency Public Health Team within the Department of Health, and my Department and its agencies follow their advice.

All queries in relation to public health should therefore be directed to the Department of Health. You can find more information from the HSE and the Health Protection Surveillance Centre here:

<https://www2.hse.ie/coronavirus/>

and here:

<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/>

Vehicle Testing

990. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the date on which NCT and CVRT testing will resume; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5882/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time and as in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis my Department continues to be guided by National Public Health Emergency Team and the relevant national experts in relation to the resumption of services.

My officials and the Road Safety Authority are currently examining the possibility of resuming National Car Test services in light of the roadmap and the return to work protocols

published by government and I hope to make a statement on this matter in the coming weeks.

I am pleased to tell you that Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness (CVR) testing resumed on 18 May 2020, initially only for those vehicles with a test due date prior to 28 March 2020 (i.e. for vehicles that did not benefit from the three-month extension to certificates of roadworthiness). CVR testing is expected to resume fully over the following weeks for those vehicles with a test due date on or after 28 March 2020.

Tourism Industry

991. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will address a matter regarding the re-opening of hotels (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5901/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): In line with the sequence of actions detailed in the ‘Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business’ hotels (but not hotel bars) are due to re-open in Phase 4. In this regard Fáilte Ireland is currently finalising guidelines for the tourism sector, in consultation with the tourism industry and relevant authorities.

Phase 4 of the Roadmap will permit “small social gatherings by family and close friends limited to a maximum number of attendees, for a limited period of time where social distancing can be maintained (e.g. small weddings, baptisms)”. Phase 5 allows for some larger social gatherings (e.g. large weddings), although these will be restricted due to the risks involved.

All decisions regarding large social gatherings will be guided by public health advice. My officials await further clarification on the restrictions applying to social gatherings and will communicate all clarifications when received.

Sports Events

992. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the phase of the exit from the restrictions under which pigeon racing can be resumed with appropriate guidance issued; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5903/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Neither my Department nor Sport Ireland has any responsibility for Pigeon Racing. Accordingly, I am not in a position to assist the Deputy in this matter.

As the Deputy may be aware, Sport Ireland, which is funded by my Department, is the statutory body with responsibility for the development of sport, increasing participation at all levels and raising standards. It also has responsibility for the recognition of sports in Ireland. Pigeon Racing is not a recognised sport in Ireland.

Sport and Recreational Development

993. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if a submission submitted by an organisation (details supplied) has been considered; if in particular, riding schools can re-open in either phase one or two of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business in view of the fact that social distancing rules can be adhered to and that it is an

outdoor activity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5932/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): A COVID-19 Sports Monitoring Group, chaired at Ministerial level, has been established to engage directly with the sporting bodies. Sport Ireland is also directly engaging with the sporting bodies in relation to the development of protocols to facilitate a safe return to training and competition, including for equestrian activity.

As a result of these engagements, the National Governing Bodies (NGBs) of fifteen sporting activities, including Horse Sport Ireland for its outdoor equestrian sport, have developed protocols to allow its outdoor activities to be practiced safely in compliance with the prevailing public health advice under Phase One of the Roadmap for re-opening Society and Business. These protocols have been disseminated by the NGBs to their clubs and members.

Indoor equestrian sport remains closed and is scheduled to re-open in a later phase of the Roadmap for re-opening Society and Business, subject to the prevailing public health advice at that time.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

994. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will consider State support to a company (details supplied) due to the Covid-19 crisis and in the context of the almost complete shutdown of the aviation industry. [5952/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): My Department is continuing to monitor the financial impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on the aviation sector.

Some measures have already been put in place by the Government such as the wage subsidy scheme and unemployment benefits to support industries, including aviation, in these difficult times. Many EU Governments have already stepped in to provide specific support for airlines. It is not evident at this stage that, other than the general business supports that are available in Ireland, that the need for further immediate support is necessary for the Irish industry. Any Government support for airlines would have to be clearly justified by reference to strategic interests.

Motor Tax

995. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when he expects the motor tax rates for private goods vehicles, such as vans, to be assessed based on CO₂ emissions rather than engine capacity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5977/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Motor tax and Vehicle Registration Tax (VRT) based on carbon dioxide emissions (CO₂) was introduced in 2008 for passenger cars only i.e. vehicles that fell into Revenue VRT Category A.

Changes to Revenue VRT legislation (section 53 of the Finance Act 2017), which took effect from 31 July 2018, mean that some commercial vehicles that are taxed privately were brought into VRT Category A and can be taxed on the basis of CO₂ – these are Category N1 vehicles (i.e. small commercials, other than crew cabs) that have four or more seats. Commercial vehicles registered before 31 July 2018 continue to be taxed on the basis of engine size, if taxed privately.

Any changes to the existing motor tax system are required to be underpinned in primary legislation and are generally considered in the context of Budget preparations.

Vehicle Testing

996. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if provision will be made for emergency vehicle tests by the NCTS; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6048/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I am pleased to tell you that Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness (CVR) testing resumed on 18 May 2020, initially only for those vehicles with a test due date prior to 28 March 2020 (i.e. for vehicles that did not benefit from the three-month extension to certificates of roadworthiness). CVR testing is expected to resume fully over the following weeks for those vehicles with a test due date on or after 28 March 2020.

Please note that under regulation 3(9) of the Road Traffic (National Car Test) Regulations 2017 (S.I. No. 415 of 2017) and regulation 4(2) of the Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness (Vehicle Testing) Regulations 2013 (S.I. No. 347 of 2013) as amended, vehicles owned or operated by the Garda Síochána or the Defence Forces are not subject to roadworthiness testing.

Vehicle Testing

997. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the position on vehicles with NCT tests due prior to 28 March 2020 but which did not occur due to health issues of vehicle owners or other reasons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6049/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): My officials and the Road Safety Authority are currently examining the possibility of resuming National Car Test services in light of the roadmap and the national return to work protocols published by government. I hope to make a statement on this matter in the coming weeks.

It is an offence under section 18(1) of the Road Traffic Act 1961 to use a vehicle in a public place without a valid NCT certificate.

Vehicle owners that were unable to obtain an NCT certificate for their vehicle due to the issue with vehicle lifting equipment are advised to keep their Vehicle Inspection Report in their vehicle at all times and present it if requested to do so by an enforcement authority.

Emergency Services

998. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if the position regarding the use of blue lights and sirens by organisations, aside from emergency services, transporting blood such as a group (details supplied) will be clarified; if organisations involved in this activity can access the ESDS driver training program; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6051/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Exemptions from certain provisions of road traffic legislation are provided for emergency service first respond-

ers under section 87 of the Road Traffic Act 2010, as amended. These exemptions apply to members of the Garda Síochána, the fire brigade and the ambulance services.

I have no plans to extend these exemptions to any other groups.

Regional Airports

999. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will introduce supports for regional airports in view of the potential financial impact Covid-19 will have on their ability to operate post-Covid-19 and the rural and economic importance of these airports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6058/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Since the onset of the Covid-19 crisis, my Department has been in ongoing contact with the regional airports.

A Government funded PSO air service has allowed Kerry and Donegal airports to remain open, thereby helping to facilitate essential travel between these airports and Dublin. While Knock airport took the difficult decision to close at the end of March, staff who were temporarily laid off were able to avail of the Covid Pandemic Unemployment Payment. Like other SMEs, regional airports could also apply for support under the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme.

I recognise the importance of these airports to the regions they serve and that is reflected in Project Ireland 2040. The Government's commitment to regional airports is underpinned by long term planning and investment strategies and a multi-annual capital provision of €72m under the National Development Plan to 2027.

This investment is managed through the Regional Airports Programme, which provides both capital and operational aid to these airports on an annual basis.

As this current year progresses, eligible airports can apply for funding towards safety and security related projects and activities. The budget for the Regional Airports Programme for 2020 is almost €23m, which includes over €7.2m for the PSO services.

More generally, the Department continues to reflect on the level of supports that may be required to enable a rapid recovery of the aviation sector from Covid-19. It is within this context that a new Regional Airports Programme is being prepared for the period 2020 to 2024. The new Programme will take account of priorities for recovery across the airport sector.

Vehicle Testing

1000. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if drivers who have an out-of-date NCT but cannot get a test date due to Covid-19 restrictions, can continue driving; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6112/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Road Traffic (National Car Test) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 132 of 2020) provides a 4-month extension to NCT test due dates for vehicles with an NCT certificate in force on 28 March 2020 and also to vehicles with a first NCT test due during the period beginning on 28 March 2020 and ending on 31 July 2020.

My officials and the Road Safety Authority are currently examining the possibility of re-summing National Car Test services in light of the roadmap and the national return to work pro-

tocols published by government.

I hope to make a statement on this matter in the coming weeks.

Motor Insurance

1001. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the implications for drivers with their insurance company in cases in which they have an out-of-date NCT due to temporary closures of NCT centres if they are involved in an accident; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6113/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The motor insurance companies have assured me that they will not be penalizing motorists who do not currently hold an NCT certificate due to COVID 19 crisis and the unavoidable closure of the NCT centres nationwide.

Question No. 1002 answered with Question No. 987.

Departmental Expenditure

1003. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the capital expenditure of his Department from 1 January to 31 December 2019 under the heading B8.1 Smarter Travel/Sustainable Urban Transport; the individual projects and associated expenditure of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6120/20]

1046. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the capital expenditure of his Department from 1 January to 31 December 2019 under the heading of B8.5 Cycling and Walking; the individual projects and associated expenditure on each; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6699/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1003 and 1046 together.

As the Deputies may be aware, funding for walking and cycling is provided under a number of different programmes, of which the two principal ones are the Smarter Travel/Sustainable Urban Transport and the Cycling and Walking programmes.

The total funding for both programmes in 2019 was approximately €44m as set out below (some figures have been rounded) –

Subhead	Programme	Amount
B8.1	Smarter Travel/Sustainable Urban Transport Programme	€17m
B8.5	Cycling & Walking Programme	€27m

Under both programmes funding at individual project level is largely managed by the National Transport Authority (NTA) and I have therefore referred your question to the NTA for

a more detailed reply with regard to individual projects. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

However, within the Smarter Travel/Sustainable Urban Transport Programme, a portion of the funding (€4.3m in 2019) is directly administered by my Department and relates to –

- Bike Week;
- Workplace and Campus Programmes;
- Cycle Right training programme; and
- INTERREG (EU sponsored cross-border programme).

Driver Test

1004. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of driver tests conducted in respect of category B driving licences in each month in 2019, in tabular form. [6122/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): This is a matter for the Road Safety Authority. I have referred the question to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response is not received within 10 days.

Driver Test

1005. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if temporary or alternative measures are being considered to support learner drivers unable to sit their test owing to Covid-19. [6123/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): It must be understood that a learner permit is not a licence, but a permit to allow a person to drive while learning. The purpose of the driving test is to set out the minimum level of knowledge, skill and competency that a learner must demonstrate in order to become a fully licensed driver. Until a learner can meet this standard and pass this test, they are not safe to take to our roads without appropriate supervision. Hence the support that learner drivers need now is the same as it always has been - learning to drive with an experienced driver alongside.

The driving test, like other public services provided by the Road Safety Authority (RSA), has been temporarily closed for public health reasons during the COVID crisis.

The RSA undertook the appropriate risk assessments and is satisfied that it cannot, bearing in mind its responsibility for the health and safety of its employees and the general public,, undertake category B (car) driving tests on an emergency basis at this time. In particular, a driver tester would be required to be within a two metre distance continuously for a period in excess of 20 minutes. They have looked at a number of approaches to mitigate this but have not identified a means to do within the public health guidance in force, and regrettably they have been unable to carry out car driving tests on an emergency basis.

However, it may be possible to carry out driving tests in other categories of vehicles, like ambulances or buses, and the RSA assesses these on a case-by-case basis.

The RSA is currently working, in consultation with my Department, on plans for the resumption of the range of public services and functions for which it is responsible, following the publications of the Government roadmap and, more recently, the National Return to Work Safely Protocol agreed by employer and trade union representatives. Until a date has been agreed with the relevant authorities whereby driver testing can be carried out safely and in accordance with the public health requirements, there is little point in providing provisional test

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dates. The RSA has always provided urgent tests where the circumstances warrant it, and I expect this to be the case when the service is allowed to re-open.

The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time, and in this as in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis, my Department will be guided by NPHE and national experts.

Driver Test

1006. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of full-time equivalent driver test instructors currently employed. [6124/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): This is a matter for the Road Safety Authority. I have referred the question to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response is not received within 10 days.

Taxi Regulations

1007. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if an extension of 12 months can be applied to the rule that all taxis which operate under the remit of the Taxi Regulator must not be older than ten years of age in view of the fact the taxi fleet has now been put off the road due to Covid-19 and that taxi drivers have been left without employment until the matter is resolved (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6125/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As the regulatory authority for the small public service vehicle (SPSV) sector, the NTA has undertaken a range of measures designed to reduce the financial burden on SPSV operators and to make it easier for them to return to the industry when circumstances change.

Regulations have been prepared by the NTA which will be placed before the Oireachtas shortly. These regulations will provide for a temporary extension of one year to the maximum permitted vehicle age. This extension will apply to those vehicles that reach the maximum permissible age during the period from 13 March 2020 to 31 December 2020 inclusive.

Driver Test

1008. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when he expects driver tests and driving lessons to recommence. [6190/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The RSA is currently working, in consultation with my Department, on plans for the resumption of the range of public services and functions for which it is responsible, following the publications of the Government roadmap and, more recently, the National Return to Work Safely Protocol agreed by employer and trade union representatives - including carrying out risk assessments. As the Deputy will appreciate, the driving test raises particular problems in terms of compliance with the Protocol and in particular social distancing rules, as it requires the driver tester and the candidate to be within a two metre distance continuously for a period in excess of 20 minutes, in a very confined space which is not in itself a workplace under the control of the RSA.

I appreciate that the inability to carry out driving tests at this time is inconvenient to those

awaiting such tests. On a very preliminary appraisal of the Protocol, car driving tests may have to be the last of the statutory functions, for which the RSA is responsible, to recommence in or after Phase 5 of the Government's roadmap.

Dates for the resumption of the RSA's services, and any special arrangements which will need to be put into place to allow for the provision of these services, will be determined in consultation with the relevant health authorities.

Driving lessons are provided by private companies which must also ensure that they can comply with the necessary public health requirements before they can re-open their businesses. However, I expect them to encounter the same difficulties as the RSA in terms of complying with the National Return to Work Safely Protocol.

Vehicle Testing

1009. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the position regarding persons who may have failed to renew their NCT certification when it expired in 2019 and now cannot renew the certification of the car; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6203/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): It is an offence under section 18(1) of the Road Traffic Act 1961 to use a vehicle in a public place without a valid NCT certificate.

My officials and the Road Safety Authority are currently examining the possibility of re-summing NCT services in light of the roadmap and the return to work protocols published by government and I hope to make a statement on this matter in the coming weeks.

Proposed Legislation

1010. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to amend the Roads Act 1993 to facilitate the laying of underground cables along a public road corridor; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6228/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to both the national and the regional and local roads programmes.

My Department is aware of a number of issues relating to the installation of services along public road corridors and consideration will be given, in consultation with other stakeholders and in the context of future Government priorities, to possible legislative changes aimed at striking an appropriate balance between the need to protect the strategic function of public roads and service installation.

Public Transport Subsidies

1011. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if public transport will be sufficiently funded to provide an efficient, frequent train and bus service and to meet the requests of unions representing the workforce with immediate effect. [6278/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Government has been clear that continued operation of the public transport sector is important, and has been designated it among the essential services that have been able to carry on during the Covid-19 emergency. I would like to thank operators and staff who have been involved in continuing this essential service.

Throughout, the National Transport Authority (NTA) and the public transport operators are closely following the public health advices. In line with the public health advices, they are implementing a number of measures across the public transport system for enhanced cleaning regimes and to facilitate appropriate social distancing.

The sharp decline in passenger numbers since mid-March as a result of the Covid-19 health emergency has caused an unprecedented fall in fare revenues, thus creating a wide gap between costs and actual revenues. This is putting acute pressure on the existing Public Service Obligation (PSO) budget. However, it is clear that public transport is an essential service and that it is an important facilitator of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

So I have been clear that we will ensure that the PSO is appropriately funded. To that end, my Department is working closely with the NTA to quantify the additional funding requirements for the coming months, and we are engaging positively with relevant colleagues across Government in that respect.

Bus Services

1012. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if funding is available to the NTA to upgrade bus stops to have real-time passenger information displays on roads which are not subject to the BusConnects core bus corridor project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6322/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of specific public transport infrastructure from within the funding made available, including the provision of Real Time Passenger Information displays.

I can inform the Deputy that I am not aware of any particular issue in relation to the overall funding provided and the provision of real time passenger information displays; however, noting the NTA's responsibility in the matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for a more detailed reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

Aviation Industry Regulations

1013. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his position and that of the Irish Aviation Authority with regard to the circumstances in which a company (details supplied) failed to issue its customers originating from airports here, a refund within the stipulated seven-day period as required by the Irish Aviation Authority for flights from 27 March 2020 until the current date; his position with regard to the matter in which a number of airlines here have failed to issue monetary refunds to their customers during the same period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6323/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Commission for Aviation Regulation (CAR) is the statutory body with responsibility for air passenger rights in Ireland. It has released a guidance note on flight cancellations which is available at the following link:

<https://www.aviationreg.ie/news/regulation-ec-2612004-guidance-note-on-flight-cancellations-refunds-and-vouchers.962.html>

Under EU law, airlines are required to refund passengers within 7 days of the flight cancellation if the customer does not choose a rerouting option. However, the CAR guidance recognises the fact that the refund process may take an airline longer to complete in the current circumstances.

The CAR guidance sets out the process to be followed by customers who have opted for, but have not received, a refund. In such circumstances a customer should submit a complaint to the airline in the first instance. If s/he does not receive a satisfactory response from the airline within 6 weeks of making the complaint, s/he can escalate the matter to the CAR. For customers whose flight was due to depart an Irish airport, details of the process are available at www.flihhights.ie. For flights departing other EU Member States, the website lists the contact details for the relevant enforcement bodies in each EU country.

Taxi Regulations

1014. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will work with the National Transport Agency to assist taxi drivers who are not operating reduce insurance cover without having to remove their tamper proof discs and resultantly being in the situation of having to have their car rechecked before going back to work once Covid-19 restrictions are lifted. [6369/20]

1065. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the supports in place for taxi drivers during Covid-19; if he has made an approach to insurance companies to offset insurance costs for taxi drivers during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6755/20]

1078. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the reason a new arrangement of returning discs and cancelling insurance was introduced for the taxi industry for drivers that were forced to stop driving as a result of Covid-19 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6871/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1014, 1065 and 1078 together.

Since the onset of the Covid-19 Emergency and the restrictions introduced as part of the necessary public health response, passenger demand for SPSV services has fallen radically and many SPSV operators have stopped working. The NTA has therefore taken action to reduce the immediate financial burden on SPSV operators and to make it easier for them to return to the industry when circumstances change.

The NTA has engaged with the insurance industry to facilitate a suspension of SPSV insurance for those SPSV operators who decide to temporarily stop working and suspend their licences. Operators who avail of this facility will be able to either reduce their monthly premium or receive a refund from their insurer, depending on their individual arrangements with their insurer.

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To avail of this insurance reduction, SPSV operators must temporarily suspend their SPSV licences. Since the start of April about 5% of SPSV licences have been suspended. The suspension of a licence requires the removal and return of a vehicle's tamper-proof discs to the NTA in accordance with section 17 of the Taxi Regulation Act 2013. A tamper-proof disc is evidence that an SPSV is genuine with a valid licence and appropriate insurance. It would therefore be inappropriate for an SPSV to display such a disc if its licence and insurance was suspended.

The NTA is keen to facilitate the swift return to work of any SPSV operator who wishes to reactivate their licence following a temporary suspension. I am informed that the NTA has a team available nationwide to reapply tamper-proof discs free of charge, that the process takes only minutes, and that a suitability inspection will not be required to apply duplicate tamper-proof discs to an SPSV.

Public Transport Data

1015. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the estimated cost of increasing public transport capacity by 25% and the national public transport total with specific figures for Bus Éireann, Dublin Bus and Iarnród Éireann. [6378/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding relating to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport.

The issues raised are a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA) and I have, therefore, referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Driver Test

1016. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when the driver test service will re-open; the protections which will be in place for drivers and testers; and the arrangements in place for essential workers. [6394/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The RSA is currently working, in consultation with my Department, on plans for the resumption of the range of public services and functions for which it is responsible, following the publications of the Government roadmap and, more recently, the National Return to Work Safely Protocol agreed by employer and trade union representatives - including carrying out risk assessments. As the Deputy clearly appreciates, the driving test raises particular problems in terms of compliance with the Protocol and in particular social distancing rules, as it requires the driver tester and the candidate to be within a two metre distance continuously for a period in excess of 20 minutes, in a very confined space which is not in itself a workplace under the control of the RSA.

I appreciate that the inability to carry out driving tests at this time is inconvenient to those awaiting such tests including essential workers. On a very preliminary appraisal of the Protocol, car driving tests may have to be the last of the statutory functions, for which the RSA is responsible, to recommence in or after Phase 5 of the Government's roadmap .

Dates for the resumption of the RSA's services, and any special arrangements which will need to be put into place to allow for the provision of these services, will be determined in consultation with the relevant health authorities.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1017. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the protocol for tourism operators in caravan parks, holiday parks and so on (details supplied) once they are permitted to re-open. [6417/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): In line with the sequence of actions detailed in the ‘*Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business*’ caravan parks and holiday parks are due to re-open in Phase 4. In this regard, Fáilte Ireland is currently preparing guidelines for the tourism sector in consultation with the tourism industry and relevant authorities.

I have referred the Deputy’s question to Fáilte Ireland to supply any further relevant detail directly to the Deputy. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1018. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the details of the proposal to back a refund note that travel agents and tour operators can offer customers who have had to cancel bookings due to Covid-19; the circumstances in which a refund note would apply; the State guarantee proposed for such a note; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6418/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Government has approved special support measures with respect to travel agents and tour operators in the form of a State-guaranteed Refund Credit Note, which can be offered instead of cash refunds in the secure knowledge that their value is underwritten by the State. The EU Package Travel Directive places stringent refund obligations on the sector, which clearly did not foresee the catastrophic level of cancellations caused by the Covid-19 international travel restrictions, and meeting these obligations is putting incredible financial strain on the sector. Their situation is made particularly difficult as they are not in receipt of refunds from suppliers and future bookings have all but ceased.

The idea behind the Refund Credit Note is that the tour operators/travel agents may offer customers the option of the Note, which can then be used to book a future holiday or redeemed for cash at a later date. Importantly the customer may still opt for a cash refund, but if they accept the Refund Credit Note, it will work as follows:

1. It can be to the value of all of the refund due or part of the refund alongside part cash.
2. It will be issued with a future redeemable date, and on that date it can be exchanged for its cash value, or can be used to book a replacement holiday.
3. It will be State-guaranteed in the event that the travel agent or tour operator becomes insolvent.

The Refund Credit Note aims to strike a balance between preventing sector-wide bankruptcy - along with associated immediate job losses - and the rights of consumers to proper protections. The final touches are being made to the legal provisions to give effect to this, and I expect to introduce the necessary Ministerial Orders shortly.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1019. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if under the EU travel package directive persons who have had to cancel such travel bookings due to Covid-19 are entitled to a cash refund and that entitlement will continue to apply. [6419/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I can confirm that the Deputy is correct: anyone who has cancelled a package holiday due to Covid-19 is entitled to a full cash refund under the EU Package Travel Directive, and there is no change to that entitlement.

What I am doing, however, following Government approval, is making legal provision for a Government-backed Refund Credit Note, which Irish-licensed travel agents and tour operators can offer their customers as full or part refund instead of cash, so long as the customer agrees. This Government guarantee protects the cash value of the credit note in the event that a travel company fails before the customer has had a chance to use it. The introduction of this provision, which will be temporary for so long as Covid-related travel restrictions are in place, is to provide a viable, safe alternative to cash refunds, in acknowledgement of the huge financial pressure that the travel trade sector is under. The Deputy will know that many travel agents are small, local enterprises who often have long-term, repeat business with their customers, and the objective is to provide some way of alleviating cash flow pressure without undermining consumer rights and protections.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1020. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has met with companies (details supplied) regarding the reported refusal of both to provide their customers who have had cancelled bookings with a cash refund under the EU travel package directive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6420/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Commission for Aviation Regulation has statutory responsibility for enforcing airline refund obligations in Ireland, as enshrined in EU law under Regulation EC 261/2004. I understand that the Commission recently wrote to all airlines operating routes that service Ireland, reminding them of their legal obligations to provide refunds for cancelled bookings. I am aware that there are significant delays in making refunds, and while I can appreciate that there are genuine administrative challenges dealing with the unprecedented level of cancellations, the legal obligation to provide a refund is clear and unchanged. In accordance with Regulation EC 261/2004, passengers have the right to a refund of the ticket price paid when their flight is cancelled, and while airlines are entitled to offer vouchers to passengers instead, which passengers can choose to accept, the passenger is under no obligation to do so.

Anyone having difficulties securing a refund should contact the Commission. Further advice is available on its dedicated passenger rights website www.flihhtrights.ie.

EU Directives

1021. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the details of requests made by the European Commission on compliance with the fourth railway package; the response provided to such requests; the actions he is of the view are necessary in

order to fully comply with the transposition of EU Directive 2016/2370 into national law; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6425/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The European Commission initiated Infringement proceedings in 2019 for the non-transposition of Directive (EU) 2016/2370 into national legislation within the timeframe of 25 December 2018.

An approach to delivering the transposition of this Directive into Irish law has since been agreed with the Commission and work is continuing in my Department to ensure that this matter is finalised as soon as possible.

Tourism Promotion

1022. **Deputy Malcolm Noonan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the efforts being undertaken to ensure the re-establishment of tourism markets for the cottage industry bed and breakfast sector (details supplied). [6461/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): My Department has liaised with other Government departments and industry representative bodies, to align the economy wide COVID-19 supports and initiatives with tourism and hospitality needs.

The measures put in place by the Government to support businesses initially focused on supporting those who have lost their jobs and in supporting businesses to remain viable during this difficult time with specifically targeted supports to assist companies to stay operational and retain their staff.

As a result, many tourism businesses are now availing the various cross-sectoral economic supports that the Government has already put in place such as; the wage subsidy scheme, increased unemployment benefits, the state credit guarantee scheme, working capital loan schemes, enterprise support schemes and deferrals of tax liabilities, VAT, social contributions and local authority rates.

Fáilte Ireland has set up a COVID-19 Industry Advisory Group which meets weekly. The purpose of this group is to provide support to the tourism industry and to facilitate the timely sharing of information and insights to help improve the sector's understanding and response to the crisis. Fáilte Ireland has also developed a COVID-19 Business Support Hub which offers a suite of targeted supports for tourism businesses including a series of webinars from experts in each field, as well as advice guides with detailed FAQs and templates where necessary.

On 1st May, the Government published a Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business to ease the COVID-19 restrictions and re-open Ireland's economy in a phased manner. In this regard Fáilte Ireland, in conjunction with the relevant authorities, is currently preparing guidelines for the tourism sector.

Minister Ross and I have appointed a Tourism Recovery Taskforce to prepare a Tourism Recovery Plan which will include a set of recommendations on how best the Irish tourism sector can adapt and recover in the changed tourism environment as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. The plan will identify priority aims, key enablers and market opportunities for the sector for the period 2020-2023. The Taskforce may consult with stakeholders to inform its deliberations and report back this year. The membership of the Taskforce is available on my Department's website.

Taxi Regulations

1023. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if drivers of limousines with PSV licences will be permitted to use bus lanes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6463/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Bus lanes were created to provide on-street priority for bus-based public transport. Their goal is to make bus transport faster and more reliable, thereby encouraging more people to switch from private cars to public transport. This will achieve the twin goals of reducing congestion and reducing pollution.

In addition to buses, bus lanes may also be used by cyclists who, as vulnerable road users, are safer in bus lanes than in general traffic. The lanes may also, of course, be used by the emergency services.

After the lanes were originally introduced it was decided to allow taxis to use them. This was a concession based on the fact that taxis are a form of public transport available for on-street hire, like buses, unlike private hire limousines.

Since bus lanes were first introduced, there have been many requests to allow other classes of traffic to use the lanes. These have included requests on behalf of motorcyclists, multi-occupancy vehicles, electric vehicles, hired limousines, hackneys, and animal ambulances, among others. My predecessors and I have always rejected these requests. Any addition to them would reduce the quality and level of service for the ordinary commuter travelling by bus. In addition, it would not enhance the safety of the cyclists using bus lanes.

Taxi Regulations

1024. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the measures being taken to ensure that taxi drivers have a sufficient knowledge of the English language to undertake their work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6464/20]

1025. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the way in which he plans to regulate the taxi industry going forward; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6465/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1024 and 1025 together.

The regulation of the small public service vehicle (SPSV) industry, including language standards for SPSV drivers, is a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA) under the provisions of the *Taxi Regulation Act 2013*.

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

Vehicle Registration

1026. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when VRT offices will re-open to the public in order to allow persons to finalise the sale of vehicles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6473/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The RSA is currently working, in consultation with my Department, on plans for the resumption of the range of public services and functions for which it is responsible, following the publications of the

Government roadmap and, more recently, the National Return to Work Safely Protocol agreed by employer and trade union representatives - including carrying out risk assessments. This includes the NCT centres which process VRT on behalf of the Revenue Commissioners.

Dates for the resumption of the RSA's services, and any special arrangements which will need to be put into place to allow for the provision of these services, will be determined in consultation with the relevant health authorities.

The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time, and in this as in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis, my Department will be guided by NPHET and national experts.

Vehicle Testing

1027. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the expected timeline for re-opening of NCT and CRVT centres across the country; the measures that have been put in place to assist centres to deal with a backlog when the re-opening is agreed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6493/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time and as in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis my Department continues to be guided by National Public Health Emergency Team and the relevant national experts in relation to the resumption of services.

My officials and the Road Safety Authority are currently examining the possibility of resuming National Car Test services in light of the roadmap and the national return to work protocols published by government and I hope to make a statement on this matter in the coming weeks.

I am pleased to tell you that Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness (CVR) testing resumed on 18 May 2020, initially only for those vehicles with a test due date prior to 28 March 2020 (i.e. for vehicles that did not benefit from the three-month extension to certificates of roadworthiness). CVR testing is expected to resume fully over the following weeks for those vehicles with a test due date on or after 28 March 2020.

A 3-month and 4-month extension has been given to CVRT and NCT roadworthiness certificates respectively to mitigate the impact in terms of backlog. As a result, while the overall throughput in centres may be adversely impacted due to the need for appropriate health measures, it is not anticipated that there will be a significant backlog at the time of re-opening which would be directly attributable to the Covid-19 emergency measures.

Tourism Ireland Funding

1028. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the estimated full-year cost if the budget for the regional co-operative market access scheme of Tourism Ireland was doubled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6527/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Funding for the regional cooperative market access scheme is allocated to Tourism Ireland under the Tourism Marketing Fund. This year, €2,500,000 has been allocated to the scheme. Accordingly, a 100%

increase would cost a further €2,500,000 on a full year basis.

Dublin Airport Authority

1029. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he engaged in or received correspondence with the management team at Dublin Airport or the Dublin Airport board of directors on flights from northern Italy from January 2020 to date; and if so, the nature of the correspondence. [6531/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I can confirm that no engagement has taken place and no correspondence has been received from the management team at Dublin Airport or the Dublin Airport board of directors in relation to flights from Northern Italy from January 2020 to date.

Dublin Bus Fleet

1030. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the additional capacity that has been made to the Dublin Bus fleet over the past 18 months to deal with the continuing increase in bus passenger numbers. [6534/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, including the provision of the PSO bus fleet.

Noting the NTA's responsibility in the matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for a more detailed reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1031. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will publish guidelines for taxi drivers on the way in which they can implement changes to protect drivers and customers regarding Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6542/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The National Transport Authority, as the regulatory body for the small public service vehicle (SPSV) sector, has published information for the SPSV industry which includes guidelines on how to keep vehicles clean to reduce the spread of COVID-19. This document is available on the NTA's website.

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

Covid-19 Pandemic

1032. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if consideration will be given to re-opening non-commercial gyms and personal training sessions

in phase two of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business on 8 June 2020 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6550/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Government-approved Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, and its specific phasing, is based on public health advice. Compliance with the various requirements attaching to each phase of the Roadmap is essential to ensure continued progress against the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Friday last, I established an Expert Group on Return to Sport, which will provide guidance to the sporting bodies so that they can prepare for the phased return to sporting activity in line with the Government Roadmap for Reopening Business and Society. In this context it is necessary that each sporting body prepares a detailed protocol setting out the manner in which it proposes to achieve compliance with the restrictions applicable to each phase.

The Government has recognised the importance of sport and physical activity in the development and phasing of the Roadmap. Phase 1 of the Roadmap, which commenced on 18 May, permits certain outdoor sports and physical activities in groups of no more than 4 people, all of whom may not travel further than 5 km from their homes, and where social distancing can be maintained.

Driver Licences

1033. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when NDLS centres will re-open; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6560/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The RSA is currently working, in consultation with my Department, on plans for the resumption of the range of public services and functions for which it is responsible, following the publications of the Government roadmap and, more recently, the National Return to Work Safely Protocol agreed by employer and trade union representatives, including carrying out risk assessments.

Dates for the resumption of the RSA's services, and any special arrangements which will need to be put into place to allow for the provision of these services, will be determined in consultation with the relevant health authorities.

The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time, and in this, as in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis, my Department will be guided by NPHE and national experts.

Driver Test

1034. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the length of time persons will have to wait to do their driver test due to Covid-19; if extra driving lessons will be required; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6564/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The RSA is currently working, in consultation with my Department, on plans for the resumption of the range of public services and functions for which it is responsible, following the publications of the Government roadmap and, more recently, the National Return to Work Safely Protocol agreed by employer and trade union representatives - including carrying out risk assessments.

As the Deputy will appreciate, the driving test raises particular problems in terms of compliance with the Protocol and in particular social distancing rules, as it requires the driver tester

and the candidate to be within a two metre distance continuously for a period in excess of 20 minutes, in a very confined space which is not in itself a workplace under the control of the RSA.

I appreciate that the inability to carry out driving tests at this time is inconvenient to those awaiting such tests. On a very preliminary appraisal of the Protocol, car driving tests may have to be the last of the statutory functions for which the RSA is responsible to recommence in or after Phase 5 of the Government's roadmap .

Dates for the resumption of the RSA's services, and any special arrangements which will need to be put into place to allow for the provision of these services, will be determined in consultation with the relevant health authorities. No additional driving lessons will be required.

The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time, and in this as in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis, my Department will be guided by NPHE and national experts.

In regard to lessons, there is a mandatory requirement to complete a course of 12 Essential Driver Training lessons, and this has not changed.

Public Bike Schemes

1035. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to expand the public bike scheme in Cork, Limerick, Galway and introduce one in Waterford. [6575/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to cycling and public transport infrastructure. The administration and expansion of public bike schemes in the regional cities is a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA).

Noting the NTA's responsibilities in the matter, I have referred your question to the NTA for a more detailed reply . Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Sports Capital Programme

1036. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when the next round of sports capital allocations will be opened. [6576/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): The Sports Capital Programme is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country.

The most recent (2018) round of the Sports Capital Programme attracted a record 2,337 applications. Allocations were announced in January, May and November of last year with a total of over €56 million awarded to 1,648 different projects.

All unsuccessful applicants were given the opportunity to appeal the Department's decision. In relation to the capital grants announced in November, a total of 122 appeals were submitted by the December deadline. The review of these appeals was completed last month with 6 new allocations approved.

Now that the appeals process is finalised, a full review of the 2018 round of the SCP is being undertaken. A decision on the timing of the next round of the programme will be taken when this is complete.

Vehicle Testing

1037. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of NCT tests due between 1 and 28 March 2020 but were unable to take place due to no available dates for testing before 28 March 2020. [6592/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Under the Road Safety Authority Act 2006 (Conferral of Functions) Order 2006 (S.I. No.477 of 2006) the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is the body responsible for the operation of periodic roadworthiness testing in the State. Accordingly, I have forwarded your query to the RSA as it relates to an operational matter.

Vehicle Testing

1038. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has given instructions to the NDLS, NCTS, CVRT or theory test centres regarding their re-opening plan; if he will consider the possibility of having them re-open as soon as possible while allowing for social distancing measures to deal with a growing backlog; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6594/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The RSA is currently working, in consultation with my Department, on plans for the resumption of the range of public services and functions for which it is responsible, following the publication of the Government roadmap and, more recent, the National Return to Work Safety Protocol agreed by employer and trade union representatives – including carrying out risk assessments. All such plans naturally have to take account of backlogs due to the period of closure.

The CVRT service began operating again as of 18 May 2020. Dates for the resumption of the remaining RSA functions and services, and any special arrangements which will need to be put into place to allow for the provision of these services, will be determined in consultation with the relevant health authorities.

The safety of the public, from both infection and death or injury on the roads, is of paramount importance at this time and in this, as in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis, my Department will be guided by NPHET and national experts.

National Vehicle and Driver File Access

1039. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the information made available to insurance companies from the national vehicle and driver file; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6615/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Under Section 5(1) of the Road Traffic Act 2014 data relating to penalty points is provided to Insurance Companies from my Department's National Vehicle and Driver File (NVDF). There is also a signed agreement in place between my Department and the insurance industry for the provision of penalty

point data.

The data provided consists of the penalty point offence description, number of penalty points applied for the offence, date of the offence, start date of offence on the NVDF, the total number of days remaining for the offence; and the total number of penalty points applied.

Penalty Point Data is exchanged between the Department and the insurance industry via a secure web service interface mechanism and the data is made available in real-time on a per query basis. Penalty Point data on the NVDF is available to all vehicle insurers registered with the Central Bank of Ireland. Any insurer can seek access to the same information by making an application to my Department.

Driver Test

1040. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if a timeframe for the resumption of driver tests will be confirmed; and the stage the re-opening phases test will resume (details supplied). [6626/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The RSA is currently working, in consultation with my Department, on plans for the resumption of the range of public services and functions for which it is responsible, following the publication of the Government roadmap and, more recent, the National Return to Work Safety Protocol agreed by employer and trade union representatives – including carrying out risk assessments.

As the Deputy will appreciate, the driving test raises particular problems in terms of compliance with the Protocol and in particular social distancing rules, as it requires the driver tester and the candidate to be within a two metre distance continuously for a period in excess of 20 minutes, in a very confined space which is not in itself a workplace under the control of the RSA.

I appreciate that the inability to carry out driving tests at this time is very inconvenient to those awaiting such tests. On a very preliminary appraisal of the Protocol, car driving tests may have to be the last of the statutory functions for which the RSA is responsible to recommence in or after Phase 5 of the Government's roadmap .

Dates for the resumption of the RSA's services, and any special arrangements which will need to be put into place to allow for the provision of these services, will be determined in consultation with the relevant health authorities.

The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time, and in this as in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis, my Department will be guided by NPHE and national experts.

Vehicle Testing

1041. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when CVRT centres will re-open; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6644/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I am pleased to tell you that Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness (CVR) testing resumed on 18 May 2020, initially only for those vehicles with a test due date prior to 28 March 2020 (i.e. for vehicles that did not benefit from the three-month extension to certificates of roadworthiness). CVR testing is expected to resume fully over the following weeks for those vehicles with a test due date on or

after 28 March 2020.

Sports Funding

1042. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to support local sporting organisations and clubs with funding or grants as a result of Covid-19. [6646/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): A COVID-19 Sports Monitoring Group, chaired at Ministerial level, has been established to engage directly with the sporting bodies. Sport Ireland is also directly engaging with the sporting bodies on an ongoing basis in relation to the development of protocols to facilitate a safe return to training and competition.

This extensive engagement with the sport sector has highlighted the significant, adverse impact of COVID-19 and the importance of implementing an appropriate and focused response to the challenges facing all strands of the sector, ranging from the local sporting organisations and clubs to the National Governing Bodies. It is accordingly intended to develop a Sport Recovery Action Plan, in consultation with the sector, aimed at minimising the impacts and preparing the sector to restart activity, as part of the national recovery and renewal.

Driver Licence Applications

1043. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the timelines for the introduction of an online facility to apply for a first-time learner driver permit which currently cannot be processed online; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6670/20]

1044. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the provisions being made to enable the children of farmers to apply for first tractor driver licences online in order to carry out work on their farms during the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6671/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1043 and 1044 together.

To obtain a category W licence for work vehicles and land tractors with or without a trailer, a person must first pass the BW category driver theory test to gain their learner permit, and then pass the W category driving test. As with other aspects of driving licence services, driver theory tests and the over-counter issuing of learner permits are currently suspended.

The Road Safety Authority is currently working, in consultation with my Department, on plans for the resumption of the range of public services and functions for which it is responsible, following the publication of the Government roadmap and, more recent, the National Return to Work Safety Protocol agreed by employer and trade union representatives – including carrying out risk assessments.

It is not possible to carry out the driver theory tests online, as it is vital that the identity of the candidate can be established, and that there is no possibility of fraud or misrepresentation. I appreciate that the inability to carry out the driver theory test at this time is inconvenient to those awaiting such tests.

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Dates for the resumption of the Authority's services, and any special arrangements which will need to be put into place to allow for the provision of these services, will be determined in consultation with the relevant health authorities.

The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time, and in this as in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis, my Department will be guided by NPHE and national experts.

The RSA continue to work on expanding the online facility to accommodate all driving licence and learner permit application types. When this facility becomes available the RSA will update its website.

Driver Licence Applications

1045. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if an alternative is being considered to ensure that persons can still apply for a driver licence online or by post if they do not have a valid public services card in view of the fact that the issuing of the card has been suspended during the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6695/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): For those who hold a current drivers licence, in response to the Covid-19 restrictions introduced by the Government on 27 March 2020, I am pleased to tell you that Regulations were signed which extend the period of validity for all driving licences due to expire between March and June for a further four months.

No action is required of licence holders whose licences had been due to expire within this time period, as there is no need to apply for a new licence at this time.

For those who are applying for a driver licence, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is currently examining how it can resume services in line with the Government framework and National Return to Work Safety Protocol. The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time. Dates for the resumption of services and any specific arrangements that need to be put in place to allow for the provision of these services will be determined in consultation with the health authorities and relevant national experts.

If you need further information please contact the RSA by emailing them at licensingqueries@rsa.ie

Question No. 1046 answered with Question No. 1003.

Tourism Funding

1047. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has had discussions with the banking sector in relation to the need to support the tourism and hospitality sector through the major difficulties that have arisen due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6700/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): Minister Ross and I have engaged with banking representatives to address difficulties being experienced by tourism businesses. We held two meetings with the Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland on 16th April and on 5th May to discuss issues of concern including interest on facilities, credit ratings, personal guarantees and overdraft facilities.

Departmental Budgets

1048. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the budget allocated to his Department for 2020; the breakdown of this budget for the transport, tourism and sport sections; if this has been revised since its original allocation due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6738/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Department's budget is published in the Revised Estimates for 2020, available at www.gov.ie. The Department's budget has not been revised in the light of the Covid 19 emergency. The impact of the pandemic will be managed in the standard manner for managing annual budgets, albeit with an expectation that the variances from planned expenditure in 2020 will be very significant in a number of areas.

Underspends and overspends will be balanced out where possible later in the year via the transfer of savings in some areas to overspends in other areas. It is too soon to give an accurate picture of what these figures will be.

Supplementary estimates may be required in areas of significant overspend, under circumstances where it is clear that savings within the budget are not sufficient to cover overspends due to the unusual impact of Covid 19. As I mentioned in my Statement to the Dáil last week, the public transport system is a critical part of the plan for the re-opening of the economy. My Department is working closely with the National Transport Authority, NTA, and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to assess and quantify the additional funding requirement in relation to public transport this year.

Departmental Budgets

1049. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the amount his Department allocated for spending on road, cycling and rail infrastructure in addition to public transport in each of the years 2017 to 2020, in tabular form; the breakdown of this spending for 2020 to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6739/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The information requested by the Deputy is currently being collated by my officials and will be forwarded to the Deputy within 10 working days.

Road Projects Data

1050. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the estimated cost of constructing 1 km of cycle path; the estimated cost of constructing one kilometre of footpath; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6740/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, including cycling infrastructure.

Noting the NTA's responsibility in the matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for a more detailed reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

Light Rail Projects Status

1051. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of the proposed light rail system for Cork; the estimated cost of this proposal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6741/20]

1052. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if introducing light rail or tram systems in cities other than Dublin has been examined by his Department; if so, if a summary of this information including the estimated costs will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6742/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1051 and 1052 together.

As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, while in relation to light rail specifically, Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) also has a statutory role in delivery of the infrastructure in line with the plans developed by the NTA.

The Deputy may wish to be aware that transport strategies have been developed, or are being developed, for each of the major cities. As part of the development of those strategies all potentially relevant transport options are considered. Strategies have been developed and published in relation to Dublin, Galway and most recently Cork and all details regarding those strategies are available to view on the website of the NTA. I can inform the Deputy that for each of those strategies light rail was considered during their respective development and details in relation to that consideration is available on the website and within the relevant strategies.

Transport strategies will be developed by the NTA, in cooperation with the relevant authorities, for both Limerick and Waterford and work has already commenced in relation to Limerick and will hopefully commence by end Q2 in relation to Waterford.

Specifically in relation to the current status of the light rail system for Cork as contained within its Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy and noting the NTA's responsibility in the matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for a more detailed reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

Transport Infrastructure Ireland Projects

1053. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the details of transport infrastructure projects funded by his Department expected to be completed within the next five years; the estimated final cost of these projects; if a breakdown of same by the categories of road, active transport and public transport will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6743/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Project Ireland 2040 Capital Tracker published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform provides details of infrastructure projects, indicative allocations, current status, project commencement dates and proposed completion dates. It is available at the following link:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/6db7c4-investment-projects-and-programmes-tracker/>

The individual projects and programmes are subject to compliance with the Public Spend-

ing Code, including its requirements in relation to appraisal and Sanctioning Authority approval points.

Road Toll Operators

1054. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the subsidies paid to the operators of tolled roads or tunnels as part of the so-called traffic guaranteed clause for each specific road or tunnel in each of the years 2014 to 2019, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6744/20]

1055. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if the reduction in traffic levels due to Covid-19 will affect the traffic guarantee clauses included in contracts with operators of toll roads and tunnels; if the State will be liable to pay subsidies to replace the expected traffic during this time; the estimated cost of this for each toll road or tunnel in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6745/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1054 and 1055 together.

As Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, the operation and management of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. Matters relating to the day to day operations regarding national roads, including toll roads and the establishment of a system of tolls, are within the remit of TII. More specifically, the statutory power to levy tolls, to make toll bye-laws and to enter into agreements with private investors are vested in TII under Part V of the Roads Act 1993 (as amended).

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

Question No. 1056 answered with Question No. 989.

Project Ireland 2040

1057. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will be publishing a report on roads infrastructure as part of Project Ireland 2040; if so, when this will be made available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6747/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): In January 2020, my Department provided an update on national roads infrastructure developments, for 2019, to the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform in the context of a progress report on Project Ireland 2040. Please see attached a copy of that report.

Please note that this report is an overview of the progress of the National Roads Programme as at January of this year and does not include progress from January to-date.

Air Services Provision

1058. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if

he has engaged with Irish airline carriers to explore the possibility of maximising their role in Government and private cargo export contracts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6748/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The air cargo sector is fully liberalised and airlines are free to operate on a commercial basis in response to market developments internationally. With a view to keeping essential air cargo flows moving during the COVID-19 crisis, my Department fully supports the European Commission's recent guidance recommending a range of operational and organisational steps to ensure continuous flow of goods in a cooperative manner across the EU.

My Department was also instrumental in securing the necessary aeronautical approvals to allow Aer Lingus to operate their ongoing flight programme from Beijing, which is providing significant quantities of PPE for the Health Service Executive.

Officials from my Department continue to engage on a regular basis with airlines, other aviation stakeholders, and with the European Commission on efforts to maintain essential supply lines, and other related issues.

Vehicle Testing

1059. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the date or phase in which CVRT and NCT centres will re-open; the way in which drivers can pay their road tax in the meantime; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6749/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time and as in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis my Department continues to be guided by National Public Health Emergency Team and the relevant national experts in relation to the resumption of services.

My officials and the Road Safety Authority are currently examining the possibility of resuming National Car Test services in light of the roadmap and the national return to work protocols published by government and I hope to make a statement on this matter in the coming weeks.

I am pleased to tell you that Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness (CVR) testing resumed on 18 May 2020 - initially only for those vehicles with a test due date prior to 28 March 2020 (i.e. for vehicles that did not benefit from the three-month extension to certificates of roadworthiness). CVR testing is expected to resume fully over the following weeks for those vehicles with a test due date on or after 28 March 2020.

I can also confirm in relation to the issue of motor tax, that the requirement to have a certificate of roadworthiness in order to tax a commercial vehicle has been removed to facilitate vehicle owners during the ongoing crisis.

Driver Licences

1060. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the date or phase in which driver licensing centres will reopen; the arrangements he has made with insurance providers in the meantime; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6750/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Road Safety Authority is currently working, in consultation with my Department, on plans for the resumption

of a range of services, following the publication of the Government roadmap and the National Return to Work Safety Protocol agreed by employer and trade union representatives. This includes carrying out the appropriate risk assessments.

The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time as in all aspects of the COVID 19 crisis and my Department continues to be guided by the National Public Health Emergency Team and the relevant national experts in relation to the resumption of services.

Dates for the resumption of the Authority's services, and any special arrangements which will need to be put into place to allow for the provision of these services, will be determined in consultation with the relevant health authorities.

The Authority continues to work on expanding the online facility to accommodate all driving licence and learner permit application types. When this facility becomes available, the Authority will update its website.

Insurance Ireland have indicated that their members will treat driving licences, learner permits and NCT certificates that have had the date of expiry extended by 4 months, as valid.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1061. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the details of the return to work protocols for public transport workers and providers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6751/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The recently announced 'Return to Work Safely Protocol' sets out the steps and processes employers and workers must take to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 in the workplace - <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.pdf>. It is understood that the Health and Safety Authority will oversee the implementation of the protocol and Inspectors will provide advice and support to employers and employees on how they are implementing the Covid-19 measures in the workplace.

The public transport sector has continuously engaged with public health to ensure the safe operation of services throughout this health emergency, and will continue work to ensure the ongoing safe provision of public transport as restrictions are lifted. The implementation of work protocols for public transport workers and providers is a matter for individual operators in line with public health advice and the recently published protocol.

Departmental Programmes

1062. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the active travel projects funded by his Department in each of the years 2018, 2019 and 2020 by project name, project details, county and cost in tabular form. [6752/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As the Deputy may be aware, funding for active travel is provided under a number of different programmes, of which the two principal ones are the Smarter Travel / Sustainable Urban Transport programme and the Cycling and Walking programme, while funding is also provided to support the Green Schools programme.

The following table provides details of expenditure in 2018 and 2019 and the indicative

allocation for 2020 as budgeted at the start of the year (some figures have been rounded) –

	2018	2019	2020
Total	€39m	€45m	€107m
Smarter Travel/Sustainable Urban Transport	€20m	€17m	€28m
Green Schools Travel	€1.43m	€1.45m	€1.65m
Cycling/Walking Programme	€18m	€27m	€77m

Under both the Smarter Travel / Sustainable Urban Transport programme and the Cycling / Walking programme funding at individual project level is largely managed by the National Transport Authority (NTA) and I have therefore referred your question to the NTA for a more detailed reply with regard to individual projects. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

However, within the Smarter Travel / Sustainable Urban Transport Programme, a portion of the funding (€3.5m in 2018, €4.3m in 2019 and estimated €8m in 2020) is directly administered by my Department and relates to –

- Bike Week: an annual promotional event for cycling,
- and & Campus Programmes: promoting sustainable travel options,
- Cycle Right: the national cycle training programme,
- INTERREG: an EU supported cross-border programme,

and until 2018 also included the Active Travel Town programme and the Smarter Travel Area programme, both of which have now ended.

Funding in relation to these initiatives is not necessarily recorded and / or readily available at a county level and neither is expenditure under the Green Schools Travel programme.

Public Transport Data

1063. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the estimated cost of purchasing and running one double decker bus for one year. [6753/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, including the purchase of the PSO bus fleet across the State.

Noting the NTA's responsibility in the matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for a more detailed reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

Public Transport Data

1064. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the estimated cost of purchasing and running one train carriage for one year. [6754/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the development and delivery of public transport infrastructure in the Greater Dublin Area including, in consultation with Iarnród Éireann, development of the railway network including the purchase of rolling stock. In addition the NTA has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of publicly subvented public transport services across the State.

In light of the NTA's responsibility on this matter, I have referred the Deputy's questions to the NTA for a detailed direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Question No. 1065 answered with Question No. 1014.

Driver Test

1066. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the reason a person (details supplied) in County Meath has to sit a driver test; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6756/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Prior to 1989, the driver licensing system permitted a car and trailer to be driven under the car licence alone. Licence categories were then changed, with separate categories covering car (Category B) and car and trailer (Category BE). People licensed to drive with trailer before 1989 were allowed to keep their old entitlements, simply by indicating this wish on the application form when renewing their licences.

Where a pre-1989 licence holder did not indicate that they wished to retain the entitlement, the category was not included on the renewed licence. However, the entitlement could be restored up to ten years after last holding it. If the entitlement to drive with a trailer was allowed to lapse for longer than the ten years, the person was required to apply as a learner for the purposes of driving with a trailer.

People who have a Category B licence, and who wish to acquire a Category BE licence, do not have to wait the usual 6 months before they can take the Category BE test. This change came into effect as of 10 January 2012. It is of the utmost importance, from a safety perspective, that people are properly qualified and licensed to drive the vehicles they have charge of on our roads, taking account of the particular risks and hazards associated with the particular categories they wish to drive.

Tourism Promotion

1067. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he plans a staycation voucher scheme to stimulate local tourism here; if so, his plans in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6757/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The importance of Tourism in Ireland cannot be understated. It is a vital industry, which supported over 260,000 jobs all around the country prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Tourism is one of the most directly affected sectors in this current crisis. This is of course a concerning time for everyone in tourism. Minister Griffin and I have established an appropriate taskforce of industry, agency and

departmental expertise tasked with producing a Tourism Recovery Plan. This plan will include a set of recommendations on how best the Irish tourism sector can recover in the changed tourism environment following the Covid-19 crisis.

In common with other sectors, tourism businesses are also availing of the wide range of Government supports put in place to respond to this crisis. My Department is continuing to liaise with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and industry representative bodies, to align the economy wide COVID-19 supports and initiatives with tourism and hospitality needs.

Sports Funding

1068. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the financial supports available to local sports clubs during the Covid-19 pandemic in view of the fact many have considerable financial outgoings with fund-raising efforts severely impacted at this time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6758/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Government's overarching, cross-sectoral approach to the COVID-19 pandemic is to ensure that economic activity recovers as quickly as possible, consistent with public health advice. Measures introduced by the Government to date, which have benefitted national sporting organisations and their local sports clubs, include:

- the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme;
- the Pandemic Unemployment Payment; and
- a series of enterprise supports including liquidity funding, loan schemes and grants/vouchers, as well as deferred tax payments and deferral of commercial rates.

I am acutely aware of the difficulties and challenges facing sporting organisations. A COVID-19 Sports Monitoring Group, chaired at Ministerial level, has been established to engage directly with the sporting bodies. Sport Ireland is also directly engaging with the sporting bodies on an ongoing basis in relation to the development of protocols to facilitate a safe return to training and competition.

This extensive engagement with the sport sector has highlighted the significant, adverse impact of COVID-19 and the importance of implementing an appropriate and focused response to the challenges facing all strands of the sector, ranging from the local sporting organisations and clubs to the National Governing Bodies. It is accordingly intended to develop a Sport Recovery Action Plan, in consultation with the sector, aimed at minimising the impacts and preparing the sector to restart activity, as part of the national recovery and renewal.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1069. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to introduce mandatory wearing of face masks for all users of public transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6759/20]

1088. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has considered the need for the wearing of face coverings on public transport by transport workers and or passengers; the details of advice he has received and the minutes of meetings in

which this has been discussed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6935/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1069 and 1088 together.

On the 16th of May, An Taoiseach announced updated public health guidance in relation to wearing face coverings in certain circumstances as part of efforts to tackle coronavirus in Ireland, recommending that face coverings should be worn when using busy public transport or in enclosed indoor public areas such as retail outlets. While it is recommended that face coverings should be worn as an additional hygiene measure in these circumstances, it is not a legal requirement to do so.

Question No. 1070 answered with Question No. 973.

Sports Capital Programme Data

1071. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the budget allocation for the sports capital programme in each of the years 2016 to 2020 in tabular form; the value of applications received in each year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6761/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): The Sports Capital Programme (SCP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country.

During the period 2016 - 2020 there were 2 advertised rounds of the SCP (in 2017 and 2018). The 2018 round of the SCP attracted a record 2,337 applications. Allocations were announced in January, May and November of last year with a total of over €56 million awarded to 1,648 different projects. A full review of the 2018 round of the SCP is now underway and a decision on the timing of the next round of the programme will be taken when this is complete.

In relation to budget allocations, as it can take grantees several years to draw down their grants the money available in the sub-head each year is primarily used to pay grants that were allocated in previous years.

The specific information sought by the Deputy is set out in the following table.

Year	Sub-head budget	Value of Applications received
2016	€42m	No new round of the SCP open for applications
2017	€47m	€155m
2018	€49m	€162m
2019	€45m	No new round of the SCP open for applications
2020	€40m	New round of the SCP expected to open later this year.

Motor Tax

1072. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the amount of motor tax collected in 2019 and to date in 2020; and the amount collected by vehicle cat-

egory. [6789/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Motor tax receipts (including arrears) by vehicle category are set out in the table below for 2019 and for the period from January to the end of April 2020.

Vehicle category	2019 (€)	2020 (€)
Private cars (engine capacity)	354,782,937	103,218,225
Private cars (engine capacity electric)	13,842	5,121
Private cars (CO2)	431,800,236	169,722,690
Goods vehicles	149,307,802	50,975,306
Goods vehicles (electric)	130,941	35,438
Agricultural tractors/trench diggers/excavators	9,153,434	3,062,870
General haulage tractors	254,413	94,761
Dumpers/Forklift trucks	356,338	116,510
Off road dumpers	24,054	11,015
Machine/Workshop/Contrivance	1,808,726	571,196
Taxis/Hackneys	2,147,839	678,355
Large Public Service Vehicles	3,270,722	808,664
Schoolbuses	67,478	15,759
Youth & Community buses	141,045	45,068
Hearses	107,103	38,040
Island vehicles	74,535	21,982
Motor caravans	1,410,026	359,773
Motor cycles	3,894,882	1,354,743
Vintage motorcycles	150,747	47,809
All other vintage vehicles	2,730,270	807,298
Total	961,627,370	331,990,623

Vehicle Testing

1073. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the way in which cars with out of date NCTs that are unable to acquire a new NCT due to restrictions will impact on drivers and their insurance. [6791/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): On the 20 April 2020, I signed the Road Traffic (National Car Test) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 132 of 2020) to provide that a 4-month extension is given to test due dates for vehicles with an NCT certificate in force on 28 March 2020, or to vehicles with a first NCT test due during the period beginning on 28 March 2020 and ending on 31 July 2020.

My officials and the Road Safety Authority are currently examining the possibility of resuming National Car Test services in light of the roadmap and the national return to work protocols published by government and I hope to make a statement on this matter in the coming weeks.

Vehicle owners that were unable to obtain an NCT certificate for their vehicle prior to 28 March 2020 due to the issue with vehicle lifting equipment are advised to keep their Vehicle Inspection Report in their vehicle at all times and present it if requested to do so by an enforce-

ment authority.

Regarding the extension of roadworthiness certificates, on 31 March 2020, Insurance Ireland stated that their members will “treat such licence and NCT/CRWs as valid when people are renewing their motor insurance or taking out new motor insurance policies”.

Driver Test

1074. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the position regarding learner drivers; and when driver tests will resume. [6823/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Due to the closure of services provided by the Road Safety Authority (RSA) as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak, I took measures to extend the validity of number of documents, including the learner permit. Any learner permits which were due to expire from 1 March 2020 to 30 June 2020 inclusive have had their period of validity extended by 4 months.

The RSA is currently working, in consultation with my Department, on plans for the resumption of the range of services and functions for which it is responsible, following the publication of the Government roadmap and, more recently, the National Return to Work Safety Protocol as agreed by employer and trade union representatives.

The resumption of driver testing will be of particular concern to learner drivers. As the Deputy will appreciate, the driving test raises particular problems in terms of compliance with the Protocol and in particular social distancing rules, as it requires the driver tester and the candidate to be within a two metre distance continuously for a period in excess of 20 minutes, in a very confined space which is not in itself a workplace under the control of the RSA.

I appreciate that the inability to carry out driving tests at this time is among the many difficulties that we all are having to endure at this time, for those awaiting such tests. On a very preliminary appraisal of the Protocol, car driving tests may have to be the last of the statutory functions, for which the RSA is responsible, to recommence in or after Phase 5 of the Government’s roadmap.

Dates for the resumption of the RSA’s services, and any special arrangements which will need to be put into place to allow for the provision of these services, will be determined in consultation with the relevant health authorities.

The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time, whether from infection or from deaths and injuries on the road, and in this as in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis, my Department will be guided by NPHE and national experts.

Vehicle Registration

1075. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the position regarding persons that wish to register commercial work vehicles for tax and cannot do so without a DOE and are unable to obtain same due to the fact such centres are closed. [6824/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): In light of the temporary closure of test centres due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I have removed the requirement for commercial vehicles to have a current Certificate of Roadworthiness in force when taxing a commercial vehicle that is over a year old. The relevant Regulations are the Commercial Vehi-

Vehicle Testing

1076. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when it is envisaged that NCT centres will reopen for testing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6839/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time and as in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis my Department continues to be guided by National Public Health Emergency Team and the relevant national experts in relation to the resumption of services.

My officials and the Road Safety Authority are currently examining the possibility of resuming the National Car Test roadworthiness testing service in light of the roadmap and national return to work protocols published by government.

Dates for the resumption of services and any specific arrangements that need to be put in place to allow for the provision of these services will be determined in consultation with the relevant health authorities.

I hope to make an announcement in relation to this matter over the coming weeks.

Sports Organisations

1077. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has met with representatives of organisations (details supplied) to specifically discuss the protection of clubs and the league due to the impact of Covid-19 on club operations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6840/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I am acutely aware of the difficulties and challenges facing sporting organisations. A COVID-19 Sports Monitoring Group, chaired at Ministerial level, has been established to engage directly with the sporting bodies. Four meetings of this Group have been held to date. The Football Association of Ireland has participated in all of these meetings. Sport Ireland is also directly engaging with the sporting bodies on an ongoing basis in relation to the development of protocols to facilitate a safe return to training and competition.

This extensive engagement with the sport sector has highlighted the significant, adverse impact of COVID-19 and the importance of implementing an appropriate and focused response to the challenges facing all strands of the sector, ranging from the local sporting organisations and clubs to the National Governing Bodies and national leagues and competitions. It is accordingly intended to develop a Sport Recovery Action Plan, in consultation with the sector, aimed at minimising the impacts and preparing the sector to restart activity, as part of the national recovery and renewal.

Question No. 1078 answered with Question No. 1014.

Vehicle Testing

1079. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when the NCT test centres, driver test centres and DOE test centres will re-open. [6896/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time and as in all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis my Department continues to be guided by National Public Health Emergency Team and the relevant national experts in relation to the resumption of services.

My officials and the Road Safety Authority are currently examining the possibility of resuming National Car Test and driver testing services in light of the roadmap and the return to work protocols published by Government and I hope to make a statement on this matter in the coming weeks.

I should emphasise that the driving test raises, as the Deputy will appreciate, particular difficulties in terms of maintaining social distancing. While some accommodation is possible in driving tests for truck and bus licence categories, there are particular difficulties with car tests. I anticipate that driving tests for cars will be the last of the RSA services to resume, and that this will be part of Phase 5 of the Government's planned staging for the reopening of the country.

I am pleased to tell you that Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness (CVR) testing resumed on 18 May 2020 - initially only for those vehicles with a test due date prior to 28 March 2020 (i.e. for vehicles that did not benefit from the three-month extension to certificates of roadworthiness). CVR testing is expected to resume fully over the following weeks for those vehicles with a test due date on or after 28 March 2020.

Rail Services

1080. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the estimated amount it would cost Iarnród Éireann if it increased spending on security measures by a further 30%. [6899/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport.

The issue raised is an operational matter for Iarnród Éireann and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply.

Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1081. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has given consideration to funding support for grassroots sports groups which fall outside the eligibility criteria of the Covid-19 stability fund for community and voluntary, charity and social enterprises which will be critical to persons when exiting the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6921/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): While, as the Deputy states, many grass roots sports clubs fall outside the eligibility criteria for the Covid-19 Stability Fund, they can benefit from the various cross-sectoral measures already introduced by the Government, notably the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Pandemic Unemployment

Payment and the series of enterprise supports ranging from liquidity funding, loan schemes and grants\vouchers, as well as deferred tax payments and deferral of commercial rates.

I am acutely aware of the particular difficulties and challenges facing sporting organisations, both locally and nationally. A COVID-19 Sports Monitoring Group, chaired at Ministerial level, has been established to engage directly with the sporting bodies. Sport Ireland is also directly engaging with the sporting bodies on an ongoing basis in relation to the development of protocols to facilitate a safe return to training and competition.

This extensive engagement with the sport sector has highlighted the significant, adverse impact of COVID-19 at all levels of the Irish sporting landscape. It has also demonstrated the importance of implementing an appropriate and focused response to the challenges facing all strands of the sector, ranging from the local sporting organisations and clubs to the National Governing Bodies. It is accordingly intended to develop a Sport Recovery Action Plan, in consultation with the sector, aimed at minimising the impacts and preparing the sector to restart activity, as part of the national recovery and renewal.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1082. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on the definition of a large wedding, that is, numbers of guests, size of venue and so on; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6929/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): I assume the Deputy is referring to the Government's 'Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business'.

In line with the sequence of actions to re-open the economy and society in the Roadmap, Phase 4 will see restrictions eased to allow "small social gatherings by family and close friends limited to a maximum number of attendees, for a limited period of time where social distancing can be maintained (e.g. small weddings, baptisms)". Phase 5 allows for some larger social gatherings (e.g. large weddings), although these will be restricted due to risk.

All decisions regarding gatherings will be guided by public health advice. My officials await further clarification on the restrictions applying to social gatherings such as weddings and will communicate all clarifications when received.

Public Transport

1083. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans for additional cleaning and disinfecting of commuter trains on the northern commuter line to specifically address Covid-19 concerns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6930/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Government has been clear that continued operation of the public transport sector is important, and it has been designated among the essential services that are to carry on. I would like to thank operators and staff for their continued dedication to providing this vital service in such challenging times.

A number of measures have been introduced across the system, guided by public health advice, to ensure the continued operation of services during the pandemic, including enhanced cleaning regimes and social distancing measures across the network. My Department is engag-

ing directly with the National Transport Authority (NTA) in relation to these measures and the NTA is coordinating the response of public transport operators, including Iarnród Éireann.

Accordingly, I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Public Transport

1084. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans for additional cleaning and disinfecting of the Dublin Bus fleet to specifically address Covid-19 concerns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6931/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Government has been clear that continued operation of the public transport sector is important, and it has been designated among the essential services that are to carry on. I would like to thank operators and staff for their continued dedication to providing this vital service in such challenging times.

A number of measures have been introduced across the system, guided by public health advice, to ensure the continued operation of services during the pandemic, including enhanced cleaning regimes and social distancing measures across the network. My Department is engaging directly with the National Transport Authority (NTA) in relation to these measures and the NTA is coordinating the response of public transport operators, including Dublin Bus.

Accordingly, I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Public Transport

1085. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans for additional cleaning and disinfecting of the Bus Éireann fleet to specifically address Covid-19 concerns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6932/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Government has been clear that continued operation of the public transport sector is important, and it has been designated among the essential services that are to carry on. I would like to thank operators and staff for their continued dedication to providing this vital service in such challenging times.

A number of measures have been introduced across the system, guided by public health advice, to ensure the continued operation of services during the pandemic, including enhanced cleaning regimes and social distancing measures across the network. My Department is engaging directly with the National Transport Authority (NTA) in relation to these measures and the NTA is coordinating the response of public transport operators, including Bus Éireann.

Accordingly, I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Public Transport

1086. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the supports available for private bus operators to ensure they can comply with safe distancing

and other Covid-19 related recommendations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6933/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Covid-19 emergency, and the necessary restrictions on public movement and the temporary closure of many workplaces, education centres and leisure and social activities across the country has meant that far fewer people than normal have been needing to use public transport. Nonetheless, it remains a vital service for those it has continued to carry. This is why Government designated public transport as an essential service during the emergency situation. Public transport has served, and will continue to serve, a vital role in transporting essential workers and in supporting Government's Roadmap to Reopening Society and Business in the weeks and months ahead.

Public health advices on social distancing are relevant across the public transport sector, and operators are implementing measures to facilitate adequate social distancing measures onboard; this significantly reduces the carrying capacity of public transport services.

While the majority of public transport in Ireland is provided by the publicly-subvented bus and rail services funded through National Transport Authority's (NTA) public service obligation (PSO) programme, the public transport system also includes non-subvented bus services provided on a commercial basis by bus and coach businesses of varying size. I understand that about 90% of the commercial bus operators have suspended their services or are providing significantly reduced services at present.

From my Department's engagement their representatives, and indeed from the NTA's regular engagement with them throughout, I understand the very difficult business environment that the commercial bus operators are now dealing with. Indeed, across Government we are acutely aware that the Covid-19 situation presents huge challenges for very many business sectors.

That is why we have worked to introduce a wide programme of Government supports for impacted businesses. The range of supports available includes new schemes of wage subsidies, rates waivers, re-start grants, lending facilities, equity injection, and business advisory supports for example. I am engaging with my colleague, the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation about these matters and am raising with her the concerns and situation of the commercial operators.

Public Transport

1087. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if there are specific instructions and supports for rail workers that will be assisting passengers with ramps and so on boarding and alighting from trains specifically regarding Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6934/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Government has been clear that continued operation of the public transport sector is important, and it has been designated among the essential services that are to carry on. I would like to thank operators and staff for their continued dedication to providing this vital service in such challenging times.

A number of measures have been introduced across the system, guided by public health advice, to ensure the continued operation of services during the pandemic, including enhanced cleaning regimes and social distancing measures across the network. As the specific issue raised is an operational matter for Iarnród Éireann, I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply.

Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Question No. 1088 answered with Question No. 1069.

Road Toll Data

1089. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of toll payments made on a daily and weekly basis at toll bridges during the months of February, March, April and the first week of May 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6967/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, the operation and management of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. Matters relating to the day to day operations regarding national roads, including toll roads and the establishment of a system of tolls, are within the remit of TII. More specifically, the statutory power to levy tolls, to make toll bye-laws and to enter into agreements with private investors are vested in TII under Part V of the Roads Act 1993 (as amended).

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

Electric Vehicles

1090. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when the consultation on powered personal transporters will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6987/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As the Deputy is aware, my officials carried out a public consultation on whether or not to legislate for or regulate the use of powered personal transporters (PPTs) over a two month period late last year. In excess of 500 submissions were received, all of which were carefully considered. These submissions, in conjunction with independent research into the regulation and use of these vehicles in other jurisdictions, are forming the basis of reports prepared by officials. As such, any documents related to the consultation remain part of the deliberative process and will not be published or accessible under the Freedom of Information Act 2014 while the process is ongoing.

The issue of publication after the deliberative process has concluded will be a matter for the incoming Government.

Electric Vehicles

1091. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if the regulation of personal powered transports will be expedited in view of the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6988/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Powered personal transporters, or PPTs, are classed as mechanically propelled vehicles, the use of which requires

a licence, tax and appropriate insurance in accordance with Section 3 of the Road Traffic Act 1961. As PPTs do not fall under any existing vehicle category, it is not currently possible to tax and insure them and there is no licence category for them. Therefore their use is strictly prohibited on public roads and in public places. Any changes to this require primary legislation would be a matter for a new Government to decide.

Before legislating for the use of PPTS there should be appropriate infrastructure in place that does not endanger either other vulnerable road users or those using PPTs.

In the current context, in several jurisdictions it has been noted that there were significant increases in demand on accident and emergency medical facilities due to PPTs. This would not be advisable here given the ongoing demands on our health service due to the Covid 19 pandemic and so any change that may create such additional demands would also have to be subject to consideration from that wider public health viewpoint.

Question No. 1092 answered with Question No. 973.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1093. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to provide supports for the live entertainment industry (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7015/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): At the outset, I should clarify that my Department's role in relation to tourism lies primarily in the area of developing national tourism policy and our tourism agencies (Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland) deal with the implementation of this policy.

This is of course a concerning time for everyone involved in the tourism sector, including those who benefit from the live entertainment industry. Many tourism businesses and employees are availing of the various supports which this Government has already introduced to respond to the Covid crisis.

On tourism, Minister Griffin and I have established an appropriate taskforce of industry, agency and departmental expertise tasked with producing a Tourism Recovery Plan. This plan will include a set of recommendations on how best the Irish tourism sector can recover in the changed tourism environment following the Covid-19 crisis.

Taxi Licences

1094. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to support taxi drivers in an industry that has been devastated by the collapse in tourism, air travel, pubs and restaurants, live entertainment and sports (details supplied); if a financial support package will be established for these drivers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7017/20]

1095. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if supports for new drivers entering the taxi industry will be ceased in view of the fact the industry is over-supplied; if a buy back scheme will be established in which taxi drivers exiting the industry can recover the cost they paid for their licences and or hand the licence on to a family member as an incentive for those exiting the industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7018/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1094 and 1095 together.

The Government has put in place a range of measures to assist businesses during the current COVID-19 pandemic, including a waiver of commercial rates and the COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme. Self-employed owner operators of SPSVs may also avail of the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment of €350 a week.

I recognise that demand for SPSV services is particularly reliant on the tourism and hospitality sector, and since the onset of the Covid-19 Emergency and the introduction of restrictions as part of the necessary public health response, passenger demand for SPSV services has fallen radically and many SPSV operators have stopped working. The NTA has therefore taken action to reduce the immediate financial burden on SPSV operators and to make it easier for them to return to the industry when circumstances change.

The NTA has extended licences expiring before 12 June 2020 by three months, waived late licence renewal fees, and temporarily relaxed rules around vehicle age limits. The NTA has also engaged with the insurance industry to facilitate a suspension of SPSV insurance for those SPSV operators who decide to temporarily stop working and suspend their licences. Operators who suspend their licences will be able to either reduce their monthly premium or receive a refund from their insurer, depending on their individual arrangements with their insurer.

Finally, the transfer of SPSV licences, as suggested by the Deputy, is prohibited under section 14(1) of the Taxi Regulation Act 2013.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1096. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if a scheme will be established to financially support taxi drivers to install partitions in their taxis to protect their health and that of their passengers or possibly charge the NTA with installing such partitions in all taxis; if disinfecting and cleaning bays with sanitiser and disinfectant sprays will be established in towns and cities to ensure drivers can disinfect regularly in view of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7019/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The National Transport Authority, as the regulatory body for the small public service vehicle (SPSV) sector, has published information for the SPSV industry which includes guidelines, based on the latest available public health advice, on how to keep vehicles clean to reduce the spread of COVID-19. This document is available on the NTA's website.

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

Covid-19 Pandemic

1097. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if drivers and passengers with Bus Éireann will be kept safe as the restrictions are relaxed over the next weeks; if protective screens will be put in place between the driver and passengers on all buses; if a system of payment will be put in place that does not involve the exchange of money between driver and passenger; if the mobile cleaning units promised on 27 March 2020 will be established to ensure all buses are regularly disinfected; if a cleaning regime for all de-

pots will be put in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7020/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Government has been clear that continued operation of the public transport sector is important, and it has been designated among the essential services that are to carry on. I would like to thank operators and staff for their continued dedication to providing this vital service in such challenging times.

A number of measures have been introduced across the system, guided by public health advice, to ensure the continued operation of services during the pandemic, including enhanced cleaning regimes and social distancing measures across the network. My Department is engaging directly with the National Transport Authority (NTA) in relation to these measures and the NTA is coordinating the response of public transport operators, including Bus Éireann.

Accordingly, I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Departmental Contracts

1098. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the amount spent on external consultants by his Department in 2019; the average hourly rate; if caps or limits on such spending are in place; the way in which conflicts of interest are managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7288/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Department had published details of expenditure on all on external services (including consultancy) for the period 2013-2018 on its website. Details of expenditure on external services (including consultancy) for 2019 is attached (see Professional Services) in the link below.

The OGP Public Procurement Guidelines (January 2019) (<https://ogp.gov.ie/public-procurement-guidelines-for-goods-and-services/>) set out best practice in relation to public procurement rules regarding the purchase of goods and services including the current procurement thresholds and the measures in place to address conflicts of interest.

[Expenditure]

Childcare Services

1099. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she will clarify, following the publication of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, guidelines on Covid-19 for registered and non-registered childminders that care for children in the children's own homes and in which phase this activity can recommence. [5590/20]

1100. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she will clarify, following the publication of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, guidelines on Covid-19 for registered and non-registered childminders that care for children in their own homes and in which phase this activity can recommence. [5591/20]

1101. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she will clarify, following the publication of the Roadmap for Reopening of Society and Business, guidelines on Covid-19 for registered and non-registered childminders that care for the children of healthcare workers and in which phase of the plan this activity can recommence. [5592/20]

1102. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she will clarify, following the publication of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, guidelines on to Covid-19 for registered and non-registered childminders that care for the children of essential workers and in which phase of the plan this activity can recommence. [5593/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1099 to 1102, inclusive, together.

As per HSE guidance and in accordance with the regulations under the Health (Preservation and Protection and Other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2000, childminders who care for the children of essential workers in the children's home were permitted to continue working after childcare facilities were closed on 12 March, and are themselves considered essential workers.

The HSE guidance specifies that at present childminding should not take place in the carer's home, in order to avoid households mixing.

My Department is continuing to progress readiness measures in preparation of a phased reopening of early learning and care and school-age facilities, including registered and non-registered childminders, in line with the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

Phase 3 of the Roadmap, which is currently scheduled to begin on 29 June, provides for the opening of childminders (along with the opening of creches and preschools) for essential workers, in a phased manner. Guidance, cleared by Public Health experts, will be issued by my Department over the coming weeks.

Childcare Services

1103. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the status of the provision of childcare facilities for front-line HSE staff. [6472/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): As the Deputy will be aware, I announced on 13 May that the Temporary Childcare Scheme for Essential Health Workers, which was to deliver home based childcare to healthcare workers, would not proceed from 18 May as planned. Unfortunately, uptake for the scheme among early learning and care and school aged care providers was much lower than expected, and so the scheme had to be cancelled.

In commenting on the reasons for low take-up of the scheme by childcare providers, childcare provider organisations have referred to the lack of insurance cover for Covid-19 related claims which could be taken against them; to concerns about the difficulty of supporting staff remotely and lack of control of the environment in which their staff would be working; and the inability to provide staff with fixed lunch and rest breaks without any ongoing responsibility for the care of children.

I acknowledge that there were indeed challenges to the scheme from the beginning, however, my Department, refusing to take a risk averse position in unprecedented times, worked hard to make a scheme available. I believe that discussions about this scheme has assisted services, staff and my Department to focus on the obstacles that need to be addressed to facilitate services beginning a phased re-opening from 29 June.

Since the cancellation of the scheme, there has been progress with regard to insurance. The

primary insurer in the childcare sector has agreed that Covid-19 related claims will not be excluded from policies for services which reopen from 29 June. In terms of addressing the public health fears of the sector, the opening of other sectors on 18 May, and recent research suggesting that children may play only a minor role in spreading the virus, should help to reduce childcare practitioners' fears.

Departmental Contracts

1104. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if her Department has engaged the use of external consultants from 1 January 2020 to date; the details and costs of such engagements; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5524/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The list of engagements with external consultants on projects which commenced since 1 January 2020 to date are outlined in the following table. Only work which cost more than €500 (excluding VAT) are listed.

	Details	Name of external Consultant	Cost € (excluding VAT)
1	eDocs - Document Management System	Storm Technology Limited	33,660
2	Report writer for consultation with young people on parenting supports	Sandra Roe Research	2,500
3	Parents Centre Creative Assets and Parents Centre Media Buying	Mindshare	34,940
4	Contract for the provision of specialist expertise for the co-ordination and management of What Works (formerly Quality and Capacity Building Initiative)	Centre for Effective Services	25,020
5	Scoping Review of Literature: Best international practices in linking administrative and longitudinal study data, aka Growing Up in Ireland Pathfinder Project	Sinead Hanafin	12,166
6	Procurement advice	BID Services	4,385
7	Valuation of land at Oberstown Campus	Elliot & Fitzgerald	1,000
8	Climate Youth Justice Fund Video and Web development pages (Resources for Parents)	KICK Communications	17,895
9	Review of Scouting Ireland	Brigid McManus	4,800
		TOTAL	136,366

Childcare Services

1105. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if the guide-

lines on childminders re-opening following this period of closure will be published; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5556/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): My Department is continuing to progress readiness measures in preparation of phased reopening of early learning and care and school-age facilities, including childminders, in line with the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

Phase 3 of the Roadmap, which is currently scheduled to begin on 29 June, provides for the opening of childminders (along with the opening of creches and preschools) for essential workers, in a phased manner. Guidance, cleared by Public Health experts, will be issued by my Department over the coming weeks.

Childcare Services

1106. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if childcare facilities will be able to open for just one day per week or if crèches may operate five days per week at reduced capacity in phase five of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. [5561/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): On Friday 1 May, the Government released its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, which sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions through five phases. The re-opening of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) services will be guided by this framework and will be underpinned by the Government's Return to Work Safely Protocol, expert advice, available evidence and consultation with ELC and SAC stakeholder representatives and providers themselves.

The Roadmap proposes the gradual re-opening of ELC/SAC services across all Phases. The Roadmap references a number of possible scenarios therein, including those referenced by the Deputy of some services re-opening for one day per week, for example. I would note however that the Roadmap provides a pathway towards re-opening rather than the detailed policies for re-opening.

The sector has many questions regarding how the Roadmap will be implemented to enable services to re-open. While the COVID-19 emergency called for overnight action on closures, it is my ambition that the phased re-opening will enable sufficient time and planning to re-open in an orderly, safe and sustainable manner. I would like to reassure providers, practitioners, parents and children that I will be doing my utmost to support the sector in offering as smooth a transition as possible to the phased and restricted re-opening of ELC and SAC services.

My Department is currently working with the sector to answer the many questions that exist. This is complex work and must balance a number of important issues, including those mentioned by the Deputy around capacity. Informed by NPHE and public health guidance, consideration is being given to a range of these issues, including:

- Minimising the public health risk, especially given the difficulty of maintaining social distancing among young children and those caring for them,
- Ensuring the need for any restrictions to be consistent with young children's well-being and development needs and for ELC and SAC provision at each phase to be child-centred
- Providing ELC for preschool children, meeting parental demand for ELC and SAC as

the economy reopens, and meeting the commitment to retain places for families who paid for ELC and SAC before COVID-19, all while restricting capacity and thereby reducing adult-child ratios.

- Ensuring financial sustainability of the sector when capacity restrictions limit income and parents cannot afford to cover any higher costs with higher fees.

- Ensuring a sufficient number of qualified ELC and SAC practitioners, given likelihood of reduced adult-child ratios and existing challenges with recruitment and retention.

I am actively engaging with key stakeholders in the sector to make sure that the work on re-opening services is informed by the practical reality across the country. I have established and Chair an Advisory Group that includes representatives chosen by the sector, specifically the Association of Childhood Professionals, Community Forum, Early Childhood Ireland, National Childhood Network, PLÉ and Seas Suas. The group also includes Tusla, Pobal, SIPTU and Childminding Ireland. The first meeting of this Advisory Group took place on 13 May and I held follow up meetings on 15 and 19 May. A schedule of weekly meetings has also been agreed.

The proposals for re-opening which are in development will have due regard to Public Health guidance over the phases of easing of restrictions. I am conscious that the proposed timelines are subject to further NPHET advice, and decisions from Government.

There are a number of key decisions to be made across Government that will impact significantly on the ELC and SAC sector, including the future of emergency measures such as the Revenue operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection operated Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and other business supports. The proposals for re-opening ELC and SAC services necessarily interact with these schemes and so I will be relying on whole of Government plans, which impact the ELC and SAC sector.

It is my fervent hope that every ELC and SAC service around the country is currently considering how it can be part of helping Ireland get back to work, and how it can support children from June 29th in the very difficult circumstances they have experienced in recent months.

I hope the Deputy can appreciate that the issues raised are under consideration but that I cannot provide more detail at this time while proposals are in development. I will undertake to update the Deputy as soon as the work on re-opening services is at a more advanced stage.

Wage Subsidy Scheme

1107. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if her Department is considering further supports for the childcare sector after the expected end date of the wage subsidy scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5562/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented situation and the precise duration of this crisis cannot be known. The re-opening of ELC and SAC services will be guided by public health advice first and foremost, in accordance with the phases announced by the Government recently.

The Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS), launched by my Department on 15 April, builds on the wider provisions by Government and also recognises the unique place and importance of the childcare sector. The TWSCS layers on the Revenue-operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) and operates in tandem to this scheme. Hence, any

decisions by the Department regarding the TWSCS will therefore be guided by Government decisions regarding the TWSS in the first instance. For the present, the TWSCS will run in parallel with Revenue operated TWSS to support the particular circumstances of this sector and to ensure that, once this crisis passes, ELC and SAC services will be in a position to re-open and return to their important work.

A number of supports were available before COVID to improve the sustainability of services during normal times. These remain available now ; and it is expected that this will continue as normal when services can safely reopen. Financial supports are available for community services presenting with sustainability issues following a financial assessment by Pobal. My Department has begun to consider whether this sustainability funding can be extended to private services during the pandemic. However, I hope the Deputy can appreciate that our immediate focus is the administration of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme which is in itself a significant sustainability measure, and to address other urgent issues.

My Department has made considerable investment in the sector in recent years. I want to preserve the fruits of this investment and I want to ensure that the ELC and SAC places are still there for parents when they are past these difficult times.

Early Childhood Care and Education

1108. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if her Department is considering changes to the ECCE capitation payments to childcare providers in view of the potential impact of social distancing on childcare providers capacity. [5563/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): On Friday 1 May the Government released its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, which sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions through five phases. The re-opening of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) services will be guided by this framework and will be underpinned by the Return to Work Safely Protocol, expert advice, available evidence and consultation with ELC and SAC stakeholder representatives.

My Department is currently developing and costing proposals for the phases of reopening in line with the Roadmap. This is complex work and must balance a number of important issues. Informed by NPHE guidance, consideration is being given to a range of issues, including ensuring the financial sustainability of the sector when capacity restrictions limit income and parents cannot afford to cover higher costs through higher fees.

Departmental Correspondence

1109. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she will address queries raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5568/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy will be aware that the Temporary Childcare Scheme for Essential Health Workers was cancelled on the 13th May.

My primary focus now, and that of my Department, is to work towards the significant challenges of a phased reopening of early learning and childcare facilities for 29th June, in line with the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

I have established an advisory group to support this process and I have chaired two meetings of this group.

My Department will be communicating with the wider childcare sector in the coming weeks as plans advance

Identifying essential workers, as referred to by the Deputy, is part of the wider Government effort to ensure that society and businesses are re-opened in a carefully managed and safe manner.

Childcare Services

1110. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the public health advice available on the phased reopening of crèches as outlined in the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, published on 1 May 2020; her plans to facilitate these re-openings; the way in which she aims to facilitate the lack of capacity due to an increase in social distancing that will be required in crèches; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5641/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): On Friday 1 May, the Government released its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, which sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions through five phases. The re-opening of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) services will be guided by this framework and will be underpinned by the Government's Return to Work Safely Protocol, expert advice, available evidence and consultation with ELC and SAC stakeholder representatives and providers themselves.

The future stages of the Roadmap's re-opening of ELC/SAC services are stated as follows:

Phase 3 (29 June), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of essential workers in a phased manner with social distancing and other requirements applying.

Phase 4 (20 July), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of all other workers on a gradually increasing phased basis and slowly increasing thereafter.

The sector has many questions regarding how the Roadmap will be implemented to enable services to re-open. While the COVID-19 emergency called for overnight action on closures, it is my ambition that the phased re-opening will enable sufficient time and planning to re-open in an orderly, safe and sustainable manner. I would like to reassure providers, practitioners, parents and children that I will be doing my utmost to support the sector in offering as smooth a transition as possible to the phased and restricted re-opening of ELC and SAC services.

My Department is currently working with the sector to answer the many questions that exist. This is complex work and must balance a number of important issues, including those mentioned by the Deputy around capacity. My Department will be seeking public health advice in relation to the plans being put forward. Informed by this advice, consideration is being given to a range of these issues, including:

- Minimising the public health risk, especially given the difficulty of maintaining social distancing among young children and those caring for them,
- Ensuring the need for any restrictions to be consistent with young children's well-being and development needs and for ELC and SAC provision at each phase to be child-centred

- Providing ELC for preschool children, meeting parental demand for ELC and SAC as the economy reopens, and meeting the commitment to retain places for families who paid for ELC and SAC before COVID-19, all while restricting capacity and thereby reducing adult-child ratios.

- Ensuring financial sustainability of the sector when capacity restrictions limit income and parents cannot afford to cover any higher costs with higher fees.

- Ensuring a sufficient number of qualified ELC and SAC practitioners, given likelihood of reduced adult-child ratios and existing challenges with recruitment and retention.

I am actively engaging with key stakeholders in the sector to make sure that the work on re-opening services is informed by the practical reality across the country. I have established and Chair an Advisory Group that includes representatives chosen by the sector, specifically the Association of Childhood Professionals, Community Forum, Early Childhood Ireland, National Childhood Network, PLÉ and Seas Suas. The group also includes Tusla, Pobal, SIPTU and Childminding Ireland. The first meeting of this Advisory Group took place on 13 May and I held follow up meetings on 15 and 19 May. A schedule of weekly meetings has also been agreed.

The proposals for re-opening which are in development will have due regard to Public Health guidance over the phases of easing of restrictions. I am conscious that the proposed timelines are subject to further NPHE advice, and decisions from Government.

There are a number of key decisions to be made across Government that will impact significantly on the ELC and SAC sector, including the future of emergency measures such as the Revenue operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection operated Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and other business supports. The proposals for re-opening ELC and SAC services necessarily interact with these schemes and so I will be relying on whole of Government plans, which impact the ELC and SAC sector.

It is my fervent hope that every ELC and SAC service around the country is currently considering how it can be part of helping Ireland get back to work, and how it can support children from June 29th in the very difficult circumstances they have experienced in recent months.

I will undertake to update the Deputy as soon as the work on re-opening services is at a more advanced stage.

Childcare Costs

1111. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if her attention has been drawn to instances in which crèches and childcare facilities are requiring parents to pay part of their usual fees despite being closed in view of the fact they claim to have had issues in accessing Government support. [5644/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS) provides subsidies to early learning and care providers during the period of the Covid-19 closure, to contribute to the cost of staff wages and other overheads. Services which sign up to the scheme cannot charge parents any fees during the closure period, or to retain their child's place on re-opening.

84% of providers have signed up to the scheme to date, but providers are not obligation to sign up to the scheme.

If any services are facing difficulties in accessing the scheme, they should contact Pobal, the scheme administrator, or their local County Childcare Committee, who can provide advice on the application process.

National Childcare Scheme

1112. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the status of parents and guardians who are not in employment, training or studying and that now cannot qualify for the national childcare scheme (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5714/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) opened to online applications on 20 November 2019 and paper based applications became available on 13 March 2020. To date, over 31,700 applications have been received relating to over 41,100 children.

I am very aware of the concern around transitioning to the new National Childcare Scheme (NCS) and the difficulties involved therein. The NCS is based on the principle of progressive universalism, having regard to the best interests of children and to the needs of the most economically vulnerable. Those with the least income will get the highest subsidy. Higher subsidies will be awarded to families with younger children, to reflect the higher cost of providing childcare for younger children because of the higher adult-child ratios required by the Early Years Regulations. We will also aim to support education, training and employment as routes out of poverty.

The intention behind the ‘savers’ provision for the legacy schemes you mention was to ensure that no one would lose out in the initial transition to the Scheme, so families could remain on their current entitlements until they were no longer eligible or until they no longer required childcare.

By replacing the legacy schemes, including CCS/P, the NCS will increase the number of families who can avail of subsidised childcare, and remove many of the restrictive eligibility requirements of the existing support programmes, whereby a parent must be in receipt of certain Social Protection payments or a Medical Card in order to receive targeted supports. In this way, it aims to combat the poverty traps which may exist within the existing schemes, and to appropriately incentivise employment and education / training for parents.

Under Budget 2020, I negotiated additional funding to further enhance the NCS. The maximum number of subsidised hours available under the Scheme will increase from September 2020. Enhanced awards (for parents who are working, studying or training) will increase from 40 to 45 hours per week, and standard awards (for parents who are not working, studying or training) will increase from 15 to 20 hours per week. These measures are targeted at supporting children whose parents are not in work or study, and also working families needing school age childcare. They also respond to concerns expressed by one parent groups.

I would finally note that my Department will be continually monitoring the scheme and will examine any adjustments which might be required to address unusual or anomalous cases, where this is the right thing to do to protect and benefit lower income parents. In this regard, it should be emphasised that the NCS has been designed to be flexible, with income thresholds, maximum hours and subsidy rates which can be adjusted in line with Government decisions and as more investment becomes available. As such, any adjustments deemed necessary by Government can be carried out in a quick and responsive manner.

Foster Care

1113. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if her Department or agencies working under its aegis plan on updating guidelines to foster carers and residential settings further to the publication of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and if so, the details of the comprised guidelines. [5766/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

Foster Care

1114. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if there is a mechanism in place for birth parents whose children are in foster care and who are of the view that their access rights to their child are being unduly impeded upon by Covid-19 restrictions to voice their concerns; and the decision making criteria in place under such a mechanism. [5767/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

Children in Care

1115. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the circumstances under which it will remain appropriate to defer birth parents access to children in foster and residential care especially in view of the planned relaxation of Covid-19 restrictions for the general public. [5768/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

Childcare Services

1116. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the insurance arrangements that will be put in place in respect of childcare workers providing childcare to health workers; and if these arrangements will incur an additional cost on parents or providers. [5826/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): As the Deputy will be aware, I announced on 13 May that the Temporary Childcare Scheme for Essential Health Workers would not proceed from 18 May as planned. Unfortunately, uptake for the scheme among early learning and care and school aged care providers was much lower than was hoped, for a variety of reasons, and so the scheme had to be cancelled.

Childcare Services

1117. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if childminders can continue to care for children in their own home as opposed to going to the home of the child, as long as they are adhering to social distancing, hygiene and other public health advice; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5827/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): As per HSE guidance and in accordance with the regulations under the Health (Preservation and Protection and Other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2000, childminders who care for the children of essential workers in the children's home were permitted to continue working after childcare facilities were closed on 12 March, and are themselves considered essential workers.

The HSE guidance specifies that at present childminding should not take place in the carer's home, in order to avoid households mixing.

Phase 3 of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, which is currently scheduled to begin on 29 June, provides for the opening of childminders (along with the opening of creches and preschools) for essential workers, in a phased manner.

Domestic Violence Services

1118. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the measures she has taken to ensure that additional refuge supports are in place for victims of domestic and gender-based violence from March 2020 to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5887/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The response to Domestic, Sexual Violence and Gender-based Violence (DSGBV) is a cross Departmental and multi-agency issue. Policy is coordinated by the Department of Justice and Equality (DJE). Tusla, the Child and Family Agency has statutory responsibility for the care and protection of victims of DSGBV.

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs is providing Tusla with €25.3m this year for almost 60 organisations that deliver services for these victims. Tusla reports that, to date, it has allocated an additional €250,000 to service providers to support continuity of business and essential service provision related to COVID-19 including additional accommodation; staffing capacity and ICT to enable remote working.

Tusla has advised that as facilities, accommodation and arrangements are specific to each service, Tusla has been working with individual organisations to address any challenges arising in maintaining essential refuge service provision. To mitigate the impact of social distancing and isolation measures, an additional 48 refuge and non-refuge accommodation units for service users have been secured in the community, through the efforts of local services with support from Tusla.

Tusla has advised that a number of services also have access to additional spaces on an 'as needed' basis. Tusla continues to explore further options for additional contingency plans with regard to the provision of safe accommodation for victims of domestic violence during the current public health emergency.

1119. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the plans being developed by her Department or Tusla on separated parents having access to their children while the country reopens over the coming weeks; the phase of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business in which households will be allowed mix in order that separated parents have access again; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5899/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): Any disruption to family contact (access) can be very difficult and upsetting for both children/young people and also for their parents and family. The importance of the contact for the child in care and their family can not be underestimated. In compliance with national guidelines every effort is being made to continue access. Where face to face access has been a challenge or deemed too much of a risk other avenues such as facetime, skype phone or letter have been used.

As safety measures are eased Tusla has other options available to facilitate access visits. As this is an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

Childcare Services

1120. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if the State will be providing insurance cover and indemnity to those who sign up to the scheme to provide childcare in the homes of essential healthcare workers if no insurance cover can be secured elsewhere; if discussions had taken place with insurance providers before announcing the scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5908/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): As the Deputy will be aware, I announced on 13 May that the Temporary Childcare Scheme for Essential Health Workers, which was to deliver home based childcare to healthcare workers, would not proceed from 18 May as planned. Unfortunately, uptake for the scheme among early learning and care and school aged care providers was much lower than expected, and so the scheme had to be cancelled.

In commenting on the reasons for low take-up of the scheme by childcare providers, childcare provider organisations have referred to the lack of insurance cover for Covid-19 related claims which could be taken against them; to concerns about the difficulty of supporting staff remotely and lack of control of the environment in which their staff would be working; and the inability to provide staff with fixed lunch and rest breaks without any ongoing responsibility for the care of children.

I acknowledge that there were indeed challenges to the scheme from the beginning, however, my Department, refusing to take a risk averse position in unprecedented times, worked hard to make a scheme available. I believe that discussions about this scheme has assisted services, staff and my Department to focus on the obstacles that need to be addressed to facilitate services beginning a phased re-opening from 29 June.

Since the cancellation of the scheme, there has been progress with regard to insurance. The primary insurer in the childcare sector has agreed that Covid-19 related claims will not be excluded from policies for services which reopen from 29 June. In terms of addressing the public health fears of the sector, the opening of other sectors on 18 May, and recent research suggesting that children may play only a minor role in spreading the virus, should help to reduce childcare practitioners' fears.

Childcare Services

1121. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if dentists and their assistants who have remained open to perform urgent treatment on patients and children are covered under the new childcare package for essential workers. [5915/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy will be aware that the Temporary Childcare Scheme for Essential Health Workers was cancelled on the 13th May.

My primary focus now, and that of my Department, is to work towards the significant challenges of a phased reopening of early learning and childcare facilities for 29th June, in line with the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

I have established an advisory group to support this process and I have chaired two meetings of this group.

My Department will be communicating with the wider childcare sector in the coming weeks as plans advance

Identifying essential workers, as referred to by the Deputy, is part of the wider Government effort to ensure that society and businesses are re-opened in a carefully managed and safe manner.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1122. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if guidelines will issue as to whether or not sports and activity summer camps should be run in 2020 in view of the Covid-19 emergency; if her attention has been drawn to the fact that some summer camps are reportedly taking bookings; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5919/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): My Department does not have policy responsibility for summer activities that may be organised by local communities or are provided through the private sector. Funding from the Department's Youth Affairs Unit is to youth groups and clubs around the country, some of which will operate in the summer months.

The advice to these funded organisations has been to follow the guidance being issued by the Department of Health and the HSE. In addition, officials from my Department have been working with representatives from funded youth organisations to develop sector specific guidance consistent with the roadmap for the re-opening of services and companies that was published by the Government recently.

Childcare Services

1123. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if pharmacists will be included in the proposed childcare scheme for front-line essential healthcare workers in view of the fact the HSE and the Department of Health have accepted and confirmed that pharmacists are essential front-line healthcare staff. [6006/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy will be aware that the Temporary Childcare Scheme for Essential Health Workers was cancelled on

the 13th May.

My primary focus now, and that of my Department, is to work towards the significant challenges of a phased reopening of early learning and childcare facilities for 29th June, in line with the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

I have established an advisory group to support this process and I have chaired two meetings of this group.

My Department will be communicating with the wider childcare sector in the coming weeks as plans advance

Identifying essential workers, as referred to by the Deputy, is part of the wider Government effort to ensure that society and businesses are re-opened in a carefully managed and safe manner.

Childcare Services

1124. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if childcare centres will be provided with a list of essential workers in order that they can determine which children will be able to attend crèche from 29 June 2020; and if so, when this list will be published in order that parents can be informed accordingly. [6028/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): On Friday 1 May, the Government released its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, which sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions through five phases. The re-opening of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) services will be guided by this framework and will be underpinned by the Government's Return to Work Safely Protocol, expert advice, available evidence and consultation with ELC and SAC stakeholder representatives and providers themselves.

The future stages of the Roadmap's re-opening of ELC/SAC services are stated as follows:

Phase 3 (29 June), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of essential workers in a phased manner with social distancing and other requirements applying.

Phase 4 (20 July), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of all other workers on a gradually increasing phased basis and slowly increasing thereafter.

The sector has many questions regarding how the Roadmap will be implemented to enable services to re-open. While the COVID-19 emergency called for overnight action on closures, it is my ambition that the phased re-opening will enable sufficient time and planning to re-open in an orderly, safe and sustainable manner. I would like to reassure providers, practitioners, parents and children that I will be doing my utmost to support the sector in offering as smooth a transition as possible to the phased and restricted re-opening of ELC and SAC services.

My Department is currently working with the sector to answer the many questions that exist. This is complex work and must balance a number of important issues, including those mentioned by the Deputy around capacity. Informed by NPHE and public health guidance, consideration is being given to a range of these issues, including:

- Minimising the public health risk, especially given the difficulty of maintaining social distancing among young children and those caring for them,

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- Ensuring the need for any restrictions to be consistent with young children's well-being and development needs and for ELC and SAC provision at each phase to be child-centred

- Providing ELC for preschool children, meeting parental demand for ELC and SAC as the economy reopens, and meeting the commitment to retain places for families who paid for ELC and SAC before COVID-19, all while restricting capacity and thereby reducing adult-child ratios.

- Ensuring financial sustainability of the sector when capacity restrictions limit income and parents cannot afford to cover any higher costs with higher fees.

- Ensuring a sufficient number of qualified ELC and SAC practitioners, given likelihood of reduced adult-child ratios and existing challenges with recruitment and retention.

I am actively engaging with key stakeholders in the sector to make sure that the work on re-opening services is informed by the practical reality across the country. I have established and Chair an Advisory Group that includes representatives chosen by the sector, specifically the Association of Childhood Professionals, Community Forum, Early Childhood Ireland, National Childhood Network, PLÉ and Seas Suas. The group also includes Tusla, Pobal, SIPTU and Childminding Ireland. The first meeting of this Advisory Group took place on 13 May and I held follow up meetings on 15 and 19 May. A schedule of weekly meetings has also been agreed.

The proposals for re-opening which are in development will have due regard to Public Health guidance over the phases of easing of restrictions. I am conscious that the proposed timelines are subject to further NPHE advice, and decisions from Government.

There are a number of key decisions to be made across Government that will impact significantly on the ELC and SAC sector, including the future of emergency measures such as the Revenue operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection operated Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and other business supports. The proposals for re-opening ELC and SAC services necessarily interact with these schemes and so I will be relying on whole of Government plans, which impact the ELC and SAC sector.

Identifying essential workers, as referred to by the Deputy, is part of the wider Government effort to ensure that society and businesses are re-opened in a carefully managed and safe manner. I will continue to engage and communicate with the ELC and SAC sector on the details of the planned phased re-opening and I will ensure that they have absolute clarity on which families they can serve on June 29th and thereafter.

It is my fervent hope that every ELC and SAC service around the country is currently considering how it can be part of helping Ireland get back to work, and how it can support children from June 29th in the very difficult circumstances they have experienced in recent months.

I will undertake to update the Deputy as soon as the work on re-opening services is at a more advanced stage.

Childcare Services

1125. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if childcare providers will be provided with guidelines prior to the re-opening of services; and when these guidelines will be published. [6029/20]

1129. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if appropriate health and safety signage will be provided to childcare facilities for display prior to recommencing operation on 29 July 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6035/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1125 and 1129 together.

On Friday 1 May, the Government released its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, which sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions through five phases. The re-opening of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) services will be guided by this framework and will be underpinned by the Government's Return to Work Safely Protocol, expert advice, available evidence and consultation with ELC and SAC stakeholder representatives and providers themselves.

The future stages of the Roadmap's re-opening of ELC/SAC services are stated as follows:

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Phase 4 (20 July), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of all other workers on a gradually increasing phased basis and slowly increasing thereafter.

The sector has many questions regarding how the Roadmap will be implemented to enable services to re-open. While the COVID-19 emergency called for overnight action on closures, it is my ambition that the phased re-opening will enable sufficient time and planning to re-open in an orderly, safe and sustainable manner. I would like to reassure providers, practitioners, parents and children that I will be doing my utmost to support the sector in offering as smooth a transition as possible to the phased and restricted re-opening of ELC and SAC services.

My Department is currently working with the sector to answer the many questions that exist. This is complex work and must balance a number of important issues, including those mentioned by the Deputy around capacity. Guidelines, signage and other materials will be considered as part of the proposals. My Department will be seeking public health advice in relation to the plans being put forward. Informed by this advice, consideration is being given to a range of these issues, including:

- Minimising the public health risk, especially given the difficulty of maintaining social distancing among young children and those caring for them,

- Ensuring the need for any restrictions to be consistent with young children's well-being and development needs and for ELC and SAC provision at each phase to be child-centred

- Providing ELC for preschool children, meeting parental demand for ELC and SAC as the economy reopens, and meeting the commitment to retain places for families who paid for ELC and SAC before COVID-19, all while restricting capacity and thereby reducing adult-child ratios.

- Ensuring financial sustainability of the sector when capacity restrictions limit income and parents cannot afford to cover any higher costs with higher fees.

- Ensuring a sufficient number of qualified ELC and SAC practitioners, given likelihood of reduced adult-child ratios and existing challenges with recruitment and retention.

I am actively engaging with key stakeholders in the sector to make sure that the work on re-opening services is informed by the practical reality across the country. I have established

and Chair an Advisory Group that includes representatives chosen by the sector, specifically the Association of Childhood Professionals, Community Forum, Early Childhood Ireland, National Childhood Network, PLÉ and Seas Suas. The group also includes Tusla, Pobal, SIPTU and Childminding Ireland. The first meeting of this Advisory Group took place on 13 May and I held follow up meetings on 15 and 19 May. A schedule of weekly meetings has also been agreed.

The proposals for re-opening which are in development will have due regard to Public Health guidance over the phases of easing of restrictions. I am conscious that the proposed timelines are subject to further NPHE advice, and decisions from Government.

There are a number of key decisions to be made across Government that will impact significantly on the ELC and SAC sector, including the future of emergency measures such as the Revenue operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection operated Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and other business supports. The proposals for re-opening ELC and SAC services necessarily interact with these schemes and so I will be relying on whole of Government plans, which impact the ELC and SAC sector.

It is my fervent hope that every ELC and SAC service around the country is currently considering how it can be part of helping Ireland get back to work, and how it can support children from June 29th in the very difficult circumstances they have experienced in recent months.

I will undertake to update the Deputy as soon as the work on re-opening services is at a more advanced stage. I am committed to sharing guidelines as soon as possible after they have been finalised with the assistance of the Advisory Group.

Childcare Services

1126. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the days childcare services will be open for all children from 20 July 2020 in view of the fact that the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business implies that it will only be one or two days per week initially; if she will liaise with childcare providers in this regard; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6030/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): On Friday 1 May, the Government released its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, which sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions through five phases. The re-opening of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) services will be guided by this framework and will be underpinned by the Government's Return to Work Safely Protocol, expert advice, available evidence and consultation with ELC and SAC stakeholder representatives and providers themselves.

The Roadmap proposes the gradual re-opening of ELC/SAC services across all Phases, in particular Phases 1, 3 and 4. The Roadmap references a number of possible scenarios therein, including those referenced by the Deputy of some services re-opening for one or two days per week, for example. I would note however that the Roadmap provides a pathway towards re-opening rather than the detailed policies for re-opening.

The sector has many questions regarding how the Roadmap will be implemented to enable services to re-open. While the COVID-19 emergency called for overnight action on closures, it is my ambition that the phased re-opening will enable sufficient time and planning to re-open in an orderly, safe and sustainable manner. I would like to reassure providers, practitioners, parents and children that I will be doing my utmost to support the sector in offering as smooth a

transition as possible to the phased and restricted re-opening of ELC and SAC services.

My Department is currently working with the sector to answer the many questions that exist. This is complex work and must balance a number of important issues, including those mentioned by the Deputy around capacity. Informed by NPHET and public health guidance, consideration is being given to a range of these issues, including:

- Minimising the public health risk, especially given the difficulty of maintaining social distancing among young children and those caring for them,
- Ensuring the need for any restrictions to be consistent with young children's well-being and development needs and for ELC and SAC provision at each phase to be child-centred
- Providing ELC for preschool children, meeting parental demand for ELC and SAC as the economy reopens, and meeting the commitment to retain places for families who paid for ELC and SAC before COVID-19, all while restricting capacity and thereby reducing adult-child ratios.
- Ensuring financial sustainability of the sector when capacity restrictions limit income and parents cannot afford to cover any higher costs with higher fees.
- Ensuring a sufficient number of qualified ELC and SAC practitioners, given likelihood of reduced adult-child ratios and existing challenges with recruitment and retention.

I am actively engaging with key stakeholders in the sector to make sure that the work on re-opening services is informed by the practical reality across the country. I have established and Chair an Advisory Group that includes representatives chosen by the sector, specifically the Association of Childhood Professionals, Community Forum, Early Childhood Ireland, National Childhood Network, PLÉ and Seas Suas. The group also includes Tusla, Pobal, SIPTU and Childminding Ireland. The first meeting of this Advisory Group took place on 13 May and I held follow up meetings on 15 and 19 May. A schedule of weekly meetings has also been agreed.

The proposals for re-opening which are in development will have due regard to Public Health guidance over the phases of easing of restrictions. I am conscious that the proposed timelines are subject to further NPHET advice, and decisions from Government.

There are a number of key decisions to be made across Government that will impact significantly on the ELC and SAC sector, including the future of emergency measures such as the Revenue operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection operated Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and other business supports. The proposals for re-opening ELC and SAC services necessarily interact with these schemes and so I will be relying on whole of Government plans, which impact the ELC and SAC sector.

It is my fervent hope that every ELC and SAC service around the country is currently considering how it can be part of helping Ireland get back to work, and how it can support children from June 29th in the very difficult circumstances they have experienced in recent months.

I hope the Deputy can appreciate that the issues raised are under consideration but that I cannot provide more detail at this time while proposals are in development. I am committed to sharing detailed information as soon as it is finalised with the assistance of the Advisory Group. I will undertake to update the Deputy as soon as possible.

1127. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if childcare providers will be allocated PPE or grant support towards same in advance of the re-opening of services. [6032/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): As the Deputy is aware, on Friday 1 May the Government released its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, which sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions through five phases. The re-opening of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) services will be guided by this framework and will be underpinned by the Return to Work Safely Protocol, expert advice, available evidence and consultation with ELC and SAC stakeholder representatives.

The Roadmap proposes the gradual re-opening of ELC/SAC services as follows:

- Phase 3 (29 June), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of essential workers in a phased manner with social distancing and other requirements applying.
- Phase 4 (20 July), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of all other workers on a gradually increasing phased basis and slowly increasing thereafter.

My Department is currently developing and costing proposals for the different phases of reopening in line with the Roadmap. This is complex work and must balance a number of important issues.

I am actively engaging with key stakeholders in the sector to make sure that the work on reopening services is informed by the practical constraints that services face. I have established and chair an Advisory Group that includes membership from across the sector, specifically the Association of Childhood Professionals, Childminding Ireland, Early Childhood Ireland, the National Childhood Network, the National Forum for Community Childcare Services, PLÉ, Pobal, Seas Seas and SIPTU, as well as Pobal and Tusla. The first meeting of this Advisory Group took place on 13 May with the second meeting on 15 May.

Officials in my Department are currently liaising with the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) in relation to advice on infection prevention and control, including the use of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), by childcare providers. Public health guidance on these matters will be shared with childcare providers at the earliest opportunity.

Health and Safety Inspections

1128. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the way in which future inspections by Pobal and Tusla will be conducted following the reopening of childcare services; if unannounced inspections will continue; if guidelines will be provided to inspectors and childcare facilities in this regard; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6034/20]

1139. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs when Tusla, Pobal and the Department of Education and Skills are expected to recommence their inspections; the protocols that will be in place in view of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6321/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1128 and 1139 together.

On Friday 1st May, the Government released a Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business which sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions through five phases. The re-opening of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) services will be guided by this framework underpinned by expert advice, available evidence and consultation with ELC and SAC stakeholder representatives.

The future stages of the Roadmap's re-opening of ELC/SAC services are as follows:

- Phase 3 (29th June), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of essential workers in a phased manner with social distancing and other requirements applying.

- Phase 4 (20th July), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of all other workers on a gradually increasing phased basis and slowly increasing thereafter.

The sector has many questions regarding how the Roadmap will be implemented to enable services to re-open. While the COVID-19 emergency called for overnight action on closures, it is my ambition that the roadmap for the phased re-opening will enable services to re-open in an orderly, safe and sustainable manner. I would like to reassure providers, practitioners, parents and children that I will be doing my utmost to support the sector in assisting a smooth transition as possible to the phased and restricted re-opening of ELC and SAC services.

My Department is currently working with the sector to answer the many questions that exist. This is complex work and must balance a number of important issues, including those mentioned by the Deputy around capacity. Informed by NPHE and public health guidance, consideration is being given to a range of these issues, including:

- Minimising the public health risk, especially given the difficulty of maintaining social distancing among young children and those caring for them,

- Ensuring the need for any restrictions to be consistent with young children's well-being and development needs and for ELC and SAC provision at each phase to be child-centred

- Providing ELC for preschool children, meeting parental demand for ELC and SAC as the economy reopens, and meeting the commitment to retain places for families who paid for ELC and SAC before COVID-19, all while restricting capacity and thereby reducing adult-child ratios.

- Ensuring financial sustainability of the sector when capacity restrictions limit income and parents cannot afford to cover any higher costs with higher fees.

- Ensuring a sufficient number of qualified ELC and SAC practitioners, given likelihood of reduced adult-child ratios and existing challenges with recruitment and retention.

I am actively engaging with key stakeholders in the sector to make sure that the work on re-opening services is informed by the practical reality across the country. I have established and Chair an Advisory Group that includes representatives chosen by the sector, specifically the Association of Childhood Professionals, Community Forum, Early Childhood Ireland, National Childhood Network, PLÉ and Seas Suas. The group also includes Tusla, Pobal, SIPTU and Childminding Ireland. The first meeting of this Advisory Group took place on 13th May and I held follow up meetings on 15th and 19th May. A schedule of weekly meetings has also been agreed.

The proposals for re-opening which are in development will have due regard to Public Health guidance over the phases of easing of restrictions. I am conscious that the proposed timelines are subject to further NPHE advice, and decisions from Government.

My officials are engaging with Pobal about how and when they can undertake appropriate compliance inspections in the coming months. These discussions will take account of the public health situation and the phased approach to re-opening described above. Following these discussions appropriate guidelines will be developed which will cover the compliance approach to be agreed with Pobal.

The Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate carry out education-focussed inspections on behalf of my Department. Officials in my Department will be liaising with the Department of Education and Skills in relation to the recommencing of these inspections.

I have requested Tusla to respond directly to the Deputies in relation to their questions on future inspections by Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate.

My officials are liaising to ensure that the approach to these inspections is coordinated.

Question No. 1129 answered with Question No. 1125.

Childcare Services

1130. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she has contacted the insurance industry to request that childcare providers be given refunds for the period during which they were not operational; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6036/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): Insurance for early learning and care providers is a commercial matter for service providers, which is outside my remit. However, I understand that Allianz will give a rebate for insurance costs for the period of closure and Early Childhood Ireland who are the administrator of the group insurance scheme is working with Allianz to maximise the return.

The exact amount of this refund is yet to be determined but Allianz has agreed to provide a rebate.

Insurance Coverage

1131. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if childcare providers providing childcare to healthcare workers are covered by State indemnity; and if not, the reason for their exclusion. [6071/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): As the Deputy will be aware, I announced on 13 May that the Temporary Childcare Scheme for Essential Health Workers, which was to deliver home based childcare to healthcare workers, would not proceed from 18 May as planned. Unfortunately, uptake for the scheme among early learning and care and school aged care providers was much lower than expected, and so the scheme had to be cancelled.

In commenting on the reasons for low take-up of the scheme by childcare providers, childcare provider organisations have referred to the lack of insurance cover for Covid-19 related claims which could be taken against them; to concerns about the difficulty of supporting staff remotely and lack of control of the environment in which their staff would be working; and the inability to provide staff with fixed lunch and rest breaks without any ongoing responsibility for the care of children.

I acknowledge that there were indeed challenges to the scheme from the beginning, however, my Department, refusing to take a risk averse position in unprecedented times, worked hard to make a scheme available. I believe that discussions about this scheme has assisted services, staff and my Department to focus on the obstacles that need to be addressed to facilitate services beginning a phased re-opening from 29 June.

Since the cancellation of the scheme, there has been progress with regard to insurance. The primary insurer in the childcare sector has agreed that Covid-19 related claims will not be excluded from policies for services which reopen from 29 June. In terms of addressing the public health fears of the sector, the opening of other sectors on 18 May, and recent research suggesting that children may play only a minor role in spreading the virus, should help to reduce childcare practitioners' fears.

Childcare Costs

1132. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if her Department has conducted an analysis of possible price increases that will result from crèches operating at a lower capacity than usual owing to Covid-19 restrictions. [6074/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): On Friday 1 May, the Government released its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, which sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions through five phases. The re-opening of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) services will be guided by this framework and will be underpinned by the Government's Return to Work Safely Protocol, expert advice, available evidence and consultation with ELC and SAC stakeholder representatives and providers themselves.

The future stages of the Roadmap's re-opening of ELC/SAC services are stated as follows:

Phase 3 (29 June), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of essential workers in a phased manner with social distancing and other requirements applying.

Phase 4 (20 July), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of all other workers on a gradually increasing phased basis and slowly increasing thereafter.

The sector has many questions regarding how the Roadmap will be implemented to enable services to re-open. While the COVID-19 emergency called for overnight action on closures, it is my ambition that the phased re-opening will enable sufficient time and planning to re-open in an orderly, safe and sustainable manner. I would like to reassure providers, practitioners, parents and children that I will be doing my utmost to support the sector in offering as smooth a transition as possible to the phased and restricted re-opening of ELC and SAC services.

My Department is currently working with the sector to answer the many questions that exist. This is complex work and must balance a number of important issues, including those mentioned by the Deputy around capacity. Informed by NPHE and public health guidance, consideration is being given to a range of these issues, including:

- Minimising the public health risk, especially given the difficulty of maintaining social distancing among young children and those caring for them, and the need for any restrictions to be consistent with young children's well-being and development needs.

- Providing early learning and childcare for preschool children, meeting parental demand for early learning and childcare as the economy reopens, and meeting the commitment to retain

places for families who paid for early learning and childcare before COVID-19, all while restricting capacity and thereby reducing adult-child ratios.

- Ensuring financial sustainability of the sector when capacity restrictions limit income and parents cannot afford to cover any higher costs with higher fees.

- Ensuring a sufficient number of qualified early learning and childcare practitioners, given likelihood of reduced adult-child ratios and existing challenges with recruitment and retention.

I am actively engaging with key stakeholders in the sector to make sure that the work on re-opening services is informed by the practical reality across the country. I have established and Chair an Advisory Group that includes representatives chosen by the sector, specifically the Association of Childhood Professionals, Community Forum, Early Childhood Ireland, National Childhood Network, PLÉ and Seas Suas. The group also includes Tusla, Pobal, SIPTU and Childminding Ireland. The first meeting of this Advisory Group took place on 13 May and I held follow up meetings on 15 and 19 May. A schedule of weekly meetings has also been agreed.

The proposals for re-opening which are in development will have due regard to Public Health guidance over the phases of easing of restrictions. I am conscious that the proposed timelines are subject to further NPHET advice, and decisions from Government.

It is my fervent hope that every ELC and SAC service around the country is currently considering how it can be part of helping Ireland get back to work, and how it can support children from June 29th in the very difficult circumstances they have experienced in recent months. I am committed to ensuring as far as is practicable that COVID does not add to the affordability issues already being experienced with regard to childcare in Ireland.

I will undertake to update the Deputy as soon as the work on re-opening services is at a more advanced stage.

Childcare Services

1133. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if re-registrations and inspections for crèches that were expected to take place before June 2020 will be rescheduled; and the arrangements that will be put in place in this regard. [6076/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): As the matters to which the Deputy refers are an operational matter for Tusla, I have requested Tusla to respond to the Deputy directly within 10 working days.

Childcare Services

1134. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of crèches in respect of which re-registration procedures are in process. [6077/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): As the matter to which the Deputy refers is an operational matter for Tusla, I have requested Tusla to respond to the Deputy directly within 10 working days.

Children in Care

1135. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of children in the care of the State in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form; the number of these cases linked with voluntary consent in each of the years in tabular form; the number of these cases in which the voluntary consent has been used indefinitely in each year in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6147/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy

Early Years Sector

1136. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number and names of persons taking part in the advisory group analysing the reopening of early years services; the name of the six representative organisations that are participating; the planned schedule of the group meetings; if the minutes of these meetings will be uploaded to the website of her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6229/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): On Friday 1 May, the Government released its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, which sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions through five phases. The re-opening of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) services will be guided by this framework and will be underpinned by the Government's Return to Work Safely Protocol, expert advice, available evidence and consultation with ELC and SAC stakeholder representatives and providers themselves.

The sector has many questions regarding how the Roadmap will be implemented to enable services to re-open. While the COVID-19 emergency called for overnight action on closures, it is my ambition that the phased re-opening will enable sufficient time and planning to re-open in an orderly, safe and sustainable manner. I would like to reassure providers, practitioners, parents and children that I will be doing my utmost to support the sector in offering as smooth a transition as possible to the phased and restricted re-opening of ELC and SAC services.

I am actively engaging with key stakeholders in the sector to make sure that the work on re-opening services is informed by the practical reality across the country. I have established and Chair an Advisory Group, as referred to by the Deputy, comprising the following representatives from the sector, my Department, SIPTU, Pobal, and Tusla:

Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Minister Katherine Zappone (Chair)

Bernie McNally

Anne-Marie Brooks

Mark Considine

Toby Wolfe

Sectoral representatives

Marian Quinn, Association of Childhood Professionals Ireland

20 May 2020

Marie Daly, National Community Childcare Forum

Teresa Heeney, Early Childhood Ireland

Denise McCormilla, National Childhood Network

Mary Moloney, PLÉ (National Association of Higher Education Institutions offering Degree Level Training in Early Childhood Care and Education) and Chair Professionalisation Sub- Group of DCYA National Early Years Forum

Regina Bushell, Seas Suas (Independent Early Education and Childcare Providers)

Childminding representative

Bernadette Burke, Childminding Ireland

Union representative

Diane Jackson, SIPTU

Tusla

Fiona McDonnell

Pobal

David Burke

Margaret Rogers

The proposed meeting dates for this group are as follows:

13 May 2020

15 May 2020

19 May 2020

26 May 2020

2 June 2020

9 June 2020

Additional meetings may be held as and when the need arises. We plan to publish as much material related to the working of the group as soon as possible.

The proposals for re-opening which are in development will have due regard to Public Health guidance over the phases of easing of restrictions. I am conscious that the proposed timelines in the Roadmap are subject to further NPHE advice, and decisions from Government.

There are a number of key decisions to be made across Government that will impact significantly on the ELC and SAC sector, including the future of emergency measures such as the Revenue operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection operated Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and other business supports. The proposals for re-opening ELC and SAC services necessarily interact with these schemes and so I will be relying on whole of Government plans, which impact the ELC and SAC sector.

It is my fervent hope that every early education and childcare service around the country is currently considering how it can be part of helping Ireland get back to work, and how it can support children from June 29th in the very difficult circumstances they have experienced in recent months.

Childcare Services

1137. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if a strategy is being developed to facilitate childminders restarting their service; if public health advice has been sought on this issue; the public health advice offered in order that childminding can restart; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6230/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): My Department is continuing to progress readiness measures in preparation of phased reopening of early learning and care and school-age facilities, including childminders, in line with the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. These measures will be cleared by Public Health experts.

I have established an Advisory Group to support this work. Six sectorial representatives were nominated by the Professionalisation Sub Group of the Early Years Forum. These include representatives from Association of Childhood Professionals (ACP), National Childhood Network (NCN), National Forum for Community Childcare Services, Seas Suas, Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) and Plé.

SIPTU is also a member of the group in accordance with the requirement of the Return to Work Safely Protocol issued by Government on 9th May to consult with Trade Unions. Childminders are represented by Childminding Ireland.

Early Years Sector

1138. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the projected capacity percentage rate allowable in centre-based early years services as they begin to open to all workers; the way in which providers will know when they can increase their capacity and slowly work back to the original capacity; the way in which it is planned to monitor adherence to reduced capacity rates; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6320/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): On Friday 1 May, the Government released its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, which sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions through five phases. The re-opening of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) services will be guided by this framework and will be underpinned by the Government's Return to Work Safely Protocol, expert advice, available evidence and consultation with ELC and SAC stakeholder representatives and providers themselves.

The future stages of the Roadmap's re-opening of ELC/SAC services are stated as follows:

Phase 3 (29 June), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of essential workers in a phased manner with social distancing and other requirements applying.

Phase 4 (20 July), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of all other workers on a gradually increasing phased basis and slowly increasing thereafter.

The sector has many questions regarding how the Roadmap will be implemented to enable services to re-open. While the COVID-19 emergency called for overnight action on closures, it is my ambition that the phased re-opening will enable sufficient time and planning to re-open in an orderly, safe and sustainable manner. I would like to reassure providers, practitioners, parents and children that I will be doing my utmost to support the sector in offering as smooth a transition as possible to the phased and restricted re-opening of ELC and SAC services.

My Department is currently working with the sector to answer the many questions that exist. This is complex work and must balance a number of important issues, including many of those identified by the Deputy. Informed by NPHE and public health guidance, consideration is being given to a range of these issues, including:

- Minimising the public health risk, especially given the difficulty of maintaining social distancing among young children and those caring for them,
- Ensuring the need for any restrictions to be consistent with young children's well-being and development needs and for ELC and SAC provision at each phase to be child-centred
- Providing ELC for preschool children, meeting parental demand for ELC and SAC as the economy reopens, and meeting the commitment to retain places for families who paid for ELC and SAC before COVID-19, all while restricting capacity and thereby reducing adult-child ratios.
- Ensuring financial sustainability of the sector when capacity restrictions limit income and parents cannot afford to cover any higher costs with higher fees.
- Ensuring a sufficient number of qualified ELC and SAC practitioners, given likelihood of reduced adult-child ratios and existing challenges with recruitment and retention.

I am actively engaging with key stakeholders in the sector to make sure that the work on re-opening services is informed by the practical reality across the country. I have established and Chair an Advisory Group that includes representatives chosen by the sector, specifically the Association of Childhood Professionals, Community Forum, Early Childhood Ireland, National Childhood Network, PLÉ and Seas Suas. The group also includes Tusla, Pobal, SIPTU and Childminding Ireland. The first meeting of this Advisory Group took place on 13 May and I held follow up meetings on 15 and 19 May. A schedule of weekly meetings has also been agreed.

The proposals for re-opening which are in development will have due regard to Public Health guidance over the phases of easing of restrictions. I am conscious that the proposed timelines are subject to further NPHE advice, and decisions from Government.

There are a number of key decisions to be made across Government that will impact significantly on the ELC and SAC sector, including the future of emergency measures such as the Revenue operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection operated Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and other business supports. The proposals for re-opening ELC and SAC services necessarily interact with these schemes and so I will be relying on whole of Government plans, which impact the ELC and SAC sector.

It is my fervent hope that every ELC and SAC service around the country is currently considering how it can be part of helping Ireland get back to work, and how it can support children from June 29th in the very difficult circumstances they have experienced in recent months.

I hope the Deputy can appreciate that the issues raised are under consideration but that I cannot provide more detail at this time while proposals are in development. I will undertake

to update the Deputy as soon as the work on re-opening services is at a more advanced stage.

Question No. 1139 answered with Question No. 1128.

Children in Care

1140. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of children who have remained in State care after the end date of their voluntary care arrangement over the past number of years. [6336/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

Children in Care

1141. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the measures being taken to address legal oversight of the voluntary arrangements of Tusla for children in care. [6337/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

Children in Care

1142. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if voluntary consent was reviewed by Tusla during child-in-care reviews further to recent articles on the subject. [6338/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

Childcare Services

1143. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the public health advice offered regarding grandparents having to mind their grandchildren when parents return to work in circumstances in which there is limited capacity or service at their normal childcare provider; the supports her Department is putting in place for such parents; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6385/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): On Friday 1 May, the Government released its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, which sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions through five phases. The phase re-opening of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) services will be guided by this framework and will be underpinned by the Return to Work Safely Protocol, expert advice, available evidence and consultation with ELC and SAC stakeholder representatives and providers themselves.

The sector has many questions regarding how the Roadmap will be implemented to enable services to re-open. While the COVID-19 emergency called for overnight action on closures, it is my ambition that the phased re-opening will enable sufficient time and planning to re-open in an orderly, safe and sustainable manner. I would like to reassure providers, practitioners, parents and children that I will be doing my utmost to support the sector in offering as smooth a transition as possible to the phased and restricted re-opening of ELC and SAC services.

The proposals for re-opening which are in development will have due regard to Public Health guidance over the phases of easing of restrictions. I am conscious that the proposed timelines are subject to further NPHE advice, and decisions from Government.

I am also conscious of the fact that the public health situation might lead to reduced capacity in childcare services, which may create pressures for parents returning to work. My Department is working with the childcare sector on the phased provision of early learning and care and school-age childcare to ensure that services can re-open safely and support parents as effectively as possible. Where parents are making other arrangements for care, I would urge them to adhere to the latest public health advice from the HSE in doing so.

I will undertake to update the Deputy as soon as the work on re-opening services is at a more advanced stage.

Domestic Violence Services

1144. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the estimated full-year cost if the budget for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence services increased by 9%; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6517/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): Tusla, the Child and Family Agency provides funding and coordination supports to almost 60 organisations that deliver a range of services to victims of domestic, sexual and gender based violence (DSGBV) throughout the country.

In 2020, €25.3 million is being allocated to Tusla for DSGBV services.

To increase Tusla's funding for DSGBV services by 9% would therefore require an additional €2.3m, giving a full year cost of approximately €27.6m.

Childcare Services

1145. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if a person (details supplied) will be eligible for the proposed childcare for essential workers scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6546/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy will be aware that the Temporary Childcare Scheme for Essential Health Workers was cancelled on the 13th May.

My primary focus now, and that of my Department, is to work towards the significant challenges of a phased reopening of early learning and childcare facilities for 29th June, in line with the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

I have established an advisory group to support this process and I have chaired two meetings

of this group.

My Department will be communicating with the wider childcare sector in the coming weeks as plans advance

Identifying essential workers, as referred to by the Deputy, is part of the wider Government effort to ensure that society and businesses are re-opened in a carefully managed and safe manner.

Capital Expenditure Programme

1146. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of applications received for capital works for playgrounds; the local authorities that applied; and the projects applied for in tabular form. [6579/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): My Department announced the opening of the Capital Grant Funding Scheme for the refurbishment of existing playgrounds and / or the incorporation of natural play spaces on the 20th February 2020. The scheme was open to all 31 Local Authorities to make 1 application with a maximum of 3 projects.

This year 27 Local Authorities applied for funding in respect of 49 individual projects. The following table details the Local Authorities who applied for the funding and a description of the projects proposed.

Local Authority	Project	Approved/Refused	Amount
Roscommon P1	Lecarrow Playground; Installation of additional Sensory & Accessible Play Panels and replacement of the existing cradle swing seat with a Disabled Seat	Approved	€2,357
Roscommon P2	Ballyforan Playground; replace equipment with new inclusive equipment	Approved	€3,598
Roscommon P3	Monksland Playground; Replacement of existing basket swing with a Disabled Swing and to replace the existing rotating disc with an Orbit Inclusive Roundabout.	Approved	€8,042
Cavan	Con Smith Park Playground (Multi Play Unit) - Refurbishment Works Phase 2	Approved	€12,744
Clare	Rainbow Park Playground refurbishment	Approved	€16,500
Cork City P1	The Lough Playground refurbishment	Approved	€7,500
Cork City P2	Shalom Park Playground Refurbishment; New double swing unit and safer surfacing to be installed	Approved	€3,750
Cork City P3	Meelick Park Playground refurbishment; New double swing unit and safer surfacing installed.	Approved	€3,750
Cork County	Create a new Natural Play Playground	Refused	
Donegal	Ard na Ri Playground refurbishment	Approved	€19,500
Dublin City	Phase 3 - Re-imagining Stardust Playground refurbishment	Approved	€22,500

Local Authority	Project	Approved/Refused	Amount
Fingal	Robswall Playground; upgrade of existing playground in Malahide, increase accessibility and inclusivity	Approved	€16,500
Galway City P1	Doughiska Playground refurbishment; Refurbishment with a mix of natural play features and accessible equipment to the existing playground	Approved	€9,750
Galway City P2	An Sean Bhaile Playground; upgrading the two existing playgrounds to make the playgrounds more inclusive for all children regardless of ability.	Approved	€9,750
Galway County P1	Refurbishment of Tirboy Playground Tuam	Approved	€9,750
Galway County P2	Gort Road Playground Loughrea; refurbishment to include natural play elements	Approved	€5,500
Galway County P3	Refurbishment of St. Michaels Playground Ballinasloe	Approved	€3,250
Kerry P1	Ballybunnion Playground refurbishment; Replace and augment existing equipment	Approved	€3,750
Kerry P2	Fenit Playground; Replace and augment existing equipment	Approved	€11,000
Kildare	Leixlip Playground; Regeneration and extension of existing playground.	Approved	€16,500
Kilkenny P1	Refurbishment of Graiguenamanagh Playground	Approved	€2724
Kilkenny P2	Refurbishment of Thomastown Playground	Approved	€2,233
Kilkenny P3	Refurbishment of Castlecomer Playground	Approved	€1,000
Laois	Rathdowney Playground; Refurbishment & Accessibility Upgrade	Approved	€22,500
Leitrim	Drumshanbo Acres Lake Playground; refurbishment of junior unit	Approved	€22,500
Limerick P1	Refurbishment of Castleconnell Playground	Approved	€4,650
Limerick P2	Refurbishment of Abbeyfeale Playground	Approved	€4,800
Limerick P3	Refurbishment of Newcastlewest Playground	Approved	€5,550
Longford	Refurbishment and extension of Granard Playground; Refurbishment of Playground and inclusion of natural play elements.	Approved	€16,250
Louth	St. Dominic's Playground Improvement, Drogheda, Co Louth; to include refurbishment of the existing play equipment and installation of natural play equipment.	Approved	€16,500
Mayo	Playground at Leisure Centre Westport; Upgrade and replace sections of the safety surfacing and repair and/or replace existing equipment.	Approved	€16,500

Questions - Written Answers

Local Authority	Project	Approved/Refused	Amount
Meath	Clogherboy Playground, Skatepark and MUGA; Repairs and refurbishment to be carried out.	Approved	€19,500
Monaghan	Refurbishment & extension of O'Neill Park Playground, Clones	Approved	€19,500
Offaly P1	Lloyd Town Park, Tullamore Playground; Repair of playground equipment & upgrade of playground seating.	Approved	€4,219
Offaly P2	Connolly / Kearney Playground, Tullamore; repair of playground equipment	Approved	€1,406
Offaly P3	Birr Playground refurbishment; Addition of equipment such as wheelchair swing, provide for wheelchair access to carousel and provision of additional lighting	Approved	€7,500
Sligo P1	Refurbishment at Ballymote Playground	Approved	€4,988
Sligo P2	Refurbishment works at Riverstown Playground	Refused	
Sligo P3	Refurbishment works at Dromore West Playground	Refused	
South Dublin	Corkagh Park Playground; refurbishment and addition of a Natural Play Trail.	Approved	€24,000
Tipperary P1	Elm Park Playground, Clonmel, Co Tipperary; Upgrading the existing facility to ensure longevity and continuous use of this amenity within the ElmPark Estate.	Approved	€8,250
Tipperary P2	Fairgreen Playground, Carrick-on-Suir; Refurbishment of Playground	Approved	€8,250
Waterford P1	Waterford City Manor St John Playground; Installation of inclusive swings, double slide and inclusive roundabout	Approved	€11,550
Waterford P2	Tramore Inclusion Park Playground; Installation of a new inclusive peddle go-round	Approved	€4,950
Westmeath P1	Clonmellon Playground upgrade works	Approved	€5,000
Westmeath P2	Killucan Playground upgrade works	Approved	€5,000
Westmeath P3	Ballinahown village playground upgrade	Approved	€7,500
Wicklow P1	Wicklow Town Murrough playground – all-inclusive play element to be installed	Approved	€5,625
Wicklow P2	Wicklow Town Ballynerrin Playground refurbishment	Approved	€12,375

Of the 49 project applications, 46 were approved for funding with 3 projects failing to meet the minimum criteria. Local Authorities could apply for funding for the refurbishment of existing playgrounds and / or the incorporation of natural play spaces. The funding scheme was not open to applications for new playgrounds or new natural play spaces.

The following criteria applied to funding under the DCYA Capital Grant Funding Scheme for Play and Recreation 2020. In order to be eligible for funding each application required a

score of at least 30% in every criteria:

- All spaces and facilities for which funding is granted must be available for use by all children and young people in the locality at times when they are free to use them i.e. outside of school hours (30 marks)

- All facilities and equipment funded must be accessible to children and young people with special needs (30)

- All facilities and equipment funded must be youth-friendly and safe (30 marks)

- All projects funded under the scheme must provide evidence, or a commitment to providing evidence, that children and young people living locally who will have access to the facility have been consulted about the project for which funding is sought. (20 marks)

- Evidence of ability to complete the project / expenditure within the timeframe (10 marks)

Local Authorities were also required to provide confirmation that No Smoking signage will be displayed in play spaces and facilities.

Child Protection

1147. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if additional support and protection is available for children at risk of neglect, violence or exploitation during the public health emergency; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6639/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy is asking about an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

Childcare Services

1148. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs when au-pairs and childminders that work alone minding children in another home can return to work;; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6767/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): As per HSE guidance and in accordance with the regulations under the Health (Preservation and Protection and Other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2000, childminders who care for the children of essential workers in the children's home were permitted to continue working after childcare facilities were closed on 12 March, and are themselves considered essential workers.

Phase 3 of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, which is currently scheduled to begin on 29 June, provides for the opening of childminders (along with the opening of creches and preschools) for essential workers, in a phased manner.

Childcare Services

1149. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her views on correspondence from a childcare centre manager regarding reopening (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6811/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): On Friday 1 May, the Government released its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, which sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions through five phases. The re-opening of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) services will be guided by this framework and will be underpinned by the Government's Return to Work Safely Protocol, expert advice, available evidence and consultation with ELC and SAC stakeholder representatives and providers themselves.

The future stages of the Roadmap's re-opening of ELC/SAC services are stated as follows:

Phase 3 (29 June), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of essential workers in a phased manner with social distancing and other requirements applying.

Phase 4 (20 July), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of all other workers on a gradually increasing phased basis and slowly increasing thereafter.

The sector has many questions regarding how the Roadmap will be implemented to enable services to re-open. While the COVID-19 emergency called for overnight action on closures, it is my ambition that the phased re-opening will enable sufficient time and planning to re-open in an orderly, safe and sustainable manner. I would like to reassure providers, practitioners, parents and children that I will be doing my utmost to support the sector in offering as smooth a transition as possible to the phased and restricted re-opening of ELC and SAC services.

My Department is currently working with the sector to answer the many questions that exist. This is complex work and must balance a number of important issues, including those mentioned by the Deputy around capacity. Informed by NPHET and public health guidance, consideration is being given to a range of these issues, including:

- Minimising the public health risk, especially given the difficulty of maintaining social distancing among young children and those caring for them,
- Ensuring the need for any restrictions to be consistent with young children's well-being and development needs and for ELC and SAC provision at each phase to be child-centred
- Providing ELC for preschool children, meeting parental demand for ELC and SAC as the economy reopens, and meeting the commitment to retain places for families who paid for ELC and SAC before COVID-19, all while restricting capacity and thereby reducing adult-child ratios.
- Ensuring financial sustainability of the sector when capacity restrictions limit income and parents cannot afford to cover any higher costs with higher fees.
- Ensuring a sufficient number of qualified ELC and SAC practitioners, given likelihood of reduced adult-child ratios and existing challenges with recruitment and retention.

I am actively engaging with key stakeholders in the sector to make sure that the work on re-opening services is informed by the practical reality across the country. I have established and Chair an Advisory Group that includes representatives chosen by the sector, specifically the Association of Childhood Professionals, Community Forum, Early Childhood Ireland, National Childhood Network, PLÉ and Seas Suas. The group also includes Tusla, Pobal, SIPTU and Childminding Ireland. The first meeting of this Advisory Group took place on 13 May and I held follow up meetings on 15 and 19 May. A schedule of weekly meetings has also been agreed.

The proposals for re-opening which are in development will have due regard to Public

Health guidance over the phases of easing of restrictions. I am conscious that the proposed timelines are subject to further NPHEt advice, and decisions from Government.

There are a number of key decisions to be made across Government that will impact significantly on the ELC and SAC sector, including the future of emergency measures such as the Revenue operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection operated Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and other business supports. The proposals for re-opening ELC and SAC services necessarily interact with these schemes and so I will be relying on whole of Government plans, which impact the ELC and SAC sector.

It is my fervent hope that every ELC and SAC around the country is currently considering how it can be part of helping Ireland get back to work, and how it can support children from June 29th in the very difficult circumstances they have experienced in recent months.

I will undertake to update the Deputy as soon as the work on re-opening services is at a more advanced stage.

Children in Care

1150. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of children in the care of the State who have tested positive for Covid-19. [6845/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy is asking about an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

Wage Subsidy Scheme

1151. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans to backdate supports to crèches that were delayed in submitting their application to the employers subsidy scheme. [6846/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented situation that has required a series of emergency responses from the Government.

I am acutely aware of the particular impact the pandemic and the emergency measures have had on the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) providers. I am also very conscious of the importance of the ELC and SAC sector for children's positive development and in terms of supporting the economy as we move beyond this crisis.

Recognising this, I launched the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS) on 15 April. This scheme is a very significant measure to support the sector. The aim of the TWSCS is threefold:

- to support the sustainability of the ELC and SAC sector so that it is in a position to reopen after COVID-19;

- to provide parents with a reassurance that if their ELC and SAC provider signs up to the scheme, they are not required to pay fees during this COVID-19 crisis, and they will maintain their ELC / SAC place when services resume and

- to give Early Learning and Care practitioners security and to retain these vital Educators in the sector.

The TWSCS is a supplement to the Revenue operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), to enhance its provisions for the particular needs of the ELC and SAC sector. It is effective from 6 April 2020 for services who have signed up and completed the necessary application process.

The TWSCS provides participating service providers with a payment to be used towards ongoing overhead costs. This payment is backdated to 6 April 2020.

The TWSCS also provides payments to top-up wages of eligible ELC and SAC staff, supplementing the subsidy provided under the TWSS. In line with the Revenue guidance on their scheme, the TWSS cannot be applied retrospectively. An employer must not amend a payroll submission already reported to Revenue in order to qualify for the scheme. However, where ELC and SAC providers have provided top-ups to the maximum additional payment an employer can make to receive full wage subsidy under the Revenue scheme, and this is reflected on payrolls submitted to Revenue since 6 April 2020, my Department will reimburse the providers for these additional payments.

Child Detention Centres

1152. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans to publish the report into the operation of the Oberstown children's detention centre in the coming months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6847/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): I assume the Deputy is referring to the report of an external independent review of operations and best practice at the Campus that was commissioned by the Oberstown Board of Management in September 2016. The review was undertaken by Professor Barry Goldson and Professor Nicholas Hardwick. The report was submitted to the Board of Management of Oberstown in February 2017 and to me in March 2017.

The Board of Oberstown took independent legal advice on the question of publication of the review, which stated that there were legal risks around publication. Following careful examination, the Board was not in a position to satisfy itself, or me, that fair procedures had been applied before the report was finalised and submitted. In light of the legal risks associated with publication, the Board, with great reluctance, decided not to publish the report. The Board considered it necessary to strike the balance between the public interest in publishing the report and avoiding the substantial legal risks associated with such publication. The Board published the recommendations of the review in full, together with a detailed Board response to each recommendation.

I also sought the advice of the Attorney General, who advised that publication of the report was fraught with legal risk. Following detailed consideration of the complex matters involved I concluded that it was not appropriate to publish the full report. This remains the position.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

1153. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the status of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes; and the projected date for

the publication of its report. [6848/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): As I announced on 14 February 2020, the Government has granted a short extension in order for the Commission of Investigation to complete its inquiries and finalise all matters required to deliver a final report.

The Commission is now required to submit its final report to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs by the 26 June 2020.

There are a number of procedural matters to be considered prior to publication of a Commission's final report. While there is no projected date for publication I would like to see the final report published as soon as practicable after its submission. Arrangements for publication of the report will ultimately be a matter for Government.

Domestic Violence Services

1154. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she will provide a breakdown of her Department's €25.3 million budgetary allocation for 2020 for victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence related services. [6852/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The commissioning of DSGBV services is an operational matter for Tusla, Child and Family Agency. I have asked the Agency to respond directly on this matter providing the requested breakdown of allocation for 2020.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1155. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the additional budgetary allocation related to Covid-19 for victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence related services her Department has allocated. [6853/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The response to Domestic, Sexual Violence and Gender-based Violence (DSGBV) is a cross Departmental and multi-agency issue. Policy is coordinated by the Department of Justice and Equality (DJE). Tusla, the Child and Family Agency has statutory responsibility for the care and protection of victims of DSGBV.

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs is providing Tusla with €25.3m this year for almost 60 organisations that deliver services for these victims. This includes funding and coordinated supports for 22 services that provide emergency refuge and non-refuge accommodation to victims of domestic violence.

Tusla has advised the Department that, to date, it has allocated an additional €250,000 to DSGBV service providers to support continuity of business and essential service provision related to COVID-19 including additional accommodation; staffing capacity and ICT to enable remote working. The Agency has advised that the full year forecast is an estimated €0.750 million in additional funding for the DSGBV Services voluntary sector due to the impact of the Covid-19 crisis.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1156. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the assistance that will be provided to small crèche owners to assist with filling out the necessary paperwork to avail of the TWSCS. [6854/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented situation that has required a series of emergency responses from the Government.

I am acutely aware of the particular impact the pandemic and the emergency measures have had on the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) providers. I am also very conscious of the importance of the ELC and SAC sector for children's positive development and in terms of supporting the economy as we move beyond this crisis.

Recognising this, I launched the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS) on 15 April. This scheme is a very significant measure to support the sector. The aim of the TWSCS is threefold:

- to support the sustainability of the ELC and SAC sector so that it is in a position to reopen after COVID-19;

- to provide parents with a reassurance that if their ELC and SAC provider signs up to the scheme, they are not required to pay fees during this COVID-19 crisis, and they will maintain their ELC / SAC place when services resume and

- to give Early Learning and Care practitioners security and to retain these vital Educators in the sector.

A range of supports are available to all participating service providers to assist them with the administrative requirements of the scheme. My Department and Pobal have produced how-to guides on completing the application form and calculating payroll amounts. My Department has also published extensive FAQs which contain details of the TWSCS, including information on the scheme's practicalities.

Further assistance for participating providers is available from local City/County Childcare Committees and from Pobal's Early Years Provider Centre. I would urge any service provider who has specific queries or needs assistance with the scheme's requirements to get in touch with these bodies.

Childcare Services

1157. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the assistance that will be provided to small crèches to assist them in reopening safely at the appropriate time. [6855/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): On Friday 1 May the Government released its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, which sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions through five phases. The re-opening of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) services will be guided by this framework and will be underpinned by the Return to Work Safely Protocol, expert advice, available evidence and consultation with ELC and SAC stakeholder representatives and providers themselves.

The future phases of the Roadmap's re-opening of ELC/SAC services are stated as follows:

Phase 3 (29 June), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of essential workers in a phased manner with social distancing and other requirements applying.

Phase 4 (20 July), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of all other workers on a gradually increasing phased basis and slowly increasing thereafter.

The sector has many questions regarding how the Roadmap will be implemented to enable services to re-open. While the COVID-19 emergency called for swift action on closures, it is my ambition that the phased re-opening will allow for sufficient time and planning to make best use of public funding to support the safe and sustainable re-opening of the sector. I would like to reassure providers, practitioners, parents and children that I will be doing my utmost to enable as smooth a transition as possible to the phased and restricted re-opening of ELC and SAC services.

My Department is currently developing and costing proposals for reopening in line with the Roadmap. This is complex work and must balance a number of important issues. Informed by NPHE and public health guidance, consideration is being given to a range of these issues, including:

- Minimising the public health risk, especially given the difficulty of maintaining social distancing among young children and those caring for them, and the need for any restrictions to be consistent with young children's well-being and development needs.

- Providing early learning and childcare for preschool children, meeting parental demand for early learning and childcare as the economy reopens, and meeting the commitment to retain places for families who paid for early learning and childcare before COVID-19, all while restricting capacity and thereby reducing adult-child ratios.

- Ensuring financial sustainability of the sector when capacity restrictions limit income and parents cannot afford to cover any higher costs with higher fees.

- Ensuring a sufficient number of qualified early learning and childcare practitioners, given likelihood of reduced adult-child ratios and existing challenges with recruitment and retention.

I am actively engaging with key stakeholders in the sector to make sure that the work on re-opening services is informed by the practical reality across the country. I have established and Chair an Advisory Group that includes membership from across the sector, specifically the Association of Childhood Professionals, Childminding Ireland, Crann, Early Childhood Ireland, National Childhood Network, PLÉ, Pobal, Seas Seas, SIPTU and Tusla. The first meeting of this Advisory Group took place on 13 May with the second meeting on 15 May.

The proposals for re-opening which are in development will seek to implement the Public Health Framework effectively and safely across the ELC and SAC sector over the phases of easing of restrictions. I am conscious that the proposed timelines are subject to further NPHE advice, and decisions from Government.

There are a number of key decisions to be made across Government that will impact significantly on the ELC and SAC sector, including the continuation, introduction or cessation of emergency measures such as the Revenue operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection operated Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and other business supports. The proposals for re-opening ELC and SAC services necessarily interact with these existing schemes and so I will be relying on the continued close working relationships with other Ministers on whole of government plans, which impact the ELC and SAC sector.

It is my fervent hope that every ELC and SAC service around the country is currently considering how it can be part of helping Ireland get back to work, and how it can support children from June 29th in the very difficult circumstances they have experienced in recent months.

I will undertake to update the Deputy as soon as the work on re-opening services is at a more advanced stage.

Adoption Data

1158. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if calls by adoptees to have an automatic right to access their own information, including their own birth name and automatic access to their own birth certificate will be supported. [6862/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): Over the term of 32nd Dáil I endeavoured to progress the Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill, 2016 which, amongst other provisions, provided for access to birth information for adopted people.

There were provisions in the Bill, often referred to as ‘privacy provisions’, which provided for balancing the rights of adopted persons to their birth information with the rights of privacy of birth parents. These were based on legal advice that there must be some protection of birth parents’ constitutional right to privacy reflected in the legislation. There are two rights at play, the right to identity and the right to privacy, and legislation must seek to harmonise these rights.

It is well known that these privacy provisions were not popular with stakeholder groups who want unrestricted access to identity information and to birth certificates. I held a number of consultations with them and with Members of the Oireachtas seeking to reach a consensus on a mechanism for the release of information which would balance the Constitutional rights of birth parents and adopted people. Work was ongoing on reaching a consensus on this matter on the dissolution of the Dáil.

My own view is steadfast: legislation in this area must be progressed to ensure that adopted people and others can access their birth certificates and know their origins. However, any further decisions on this will fall to my successor, the incoming Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.

Online Safety

1159. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the efforts taken to date to monitor the presence of in-app purchases targeting children using applications on various devices; the measures being taken to address the issue of online safety as a result of increased exposure to screen time under Covid-19 regulations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6951/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): A range of Government Departments and agencies have a role to play in relation to online safety. In recognition of the whole of government approach required, in July 2018, the Taoiseach launched the Action Plan for Online Safety 2018-19. The Action Plan involves a wide range of actions, across six Government Departments – Communications, Climate Action and Environment; Education and Skills; Justice and Equality; Children and Youth Affairs; Health; and Business Enterprise and Innovation, recognising that online safety is not the responsibility of just one Department and signifying the range and breadth of the issues involved.

Children First operates on the premise that it is the responsibility of everyone in society to keep children and young people safe from harm. This responsibility includes keeping children safe from harm online. As part of the Action Plan for Online Safety, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs committed to amending the Children First Guidance to include a specific reference to the need to consider online safety in the completion of a Child Safeguarding Statement. An addendum to the Guidance, clarifying the need to consider online safety in the preparation of risk assessments and Child Safeguarding Statements, was finalised and published on the Department's website in January 2019. In addition, Tusla has revised its template for the completion of Child Safeguarding Statements to refer to the need to consider online risks to children if a service provides access to the internet.

As part of the government response to Covid-19, in late April, I as Minister for Children and Youth Affairs launched a range of supports for parents and children to support them during this challenging time. The first initiative is a new online gov.ie resource for parents, entitled 'Parents Centre', which brings together high quality information and online resources for parents into one portal. Parents Centre provides links to a wide variety of material including around learning, parenting and supports that are available. It also includes links to Webwise, an initiative of the Department of Education and Skills, which is the key internet safety online access point for parents in Ireland. As a response to Covid-19, the Webwise Parents Hub has recently been updated with online safety advice for parents, including around screen time as well as with the publication of 'A Parent's Guide for a Better Internet', covering topics including managing technology use at home, social networking tips and dealing with cyberbullying.

The second initiative is 'Let's Play Ireland', an online portal on gov.ie, providing access to a range of play resources for children. It is intended that the ideas on the website will encourage parents to support their children to use their imagination including ideas on how to use resources that can be found at home. The portal contains a section on screen time which includes tips for families on how to find a reasonable balance between time spent on screens and time for other types of play and activities, including family time. Additional resources will be continually developed and added to the 'Let's Play Ireland' portal.

Computer apps and games, and in-app purchases on games and apps, are subject to the provisions of general consumer protection legislation which is the responsibility of the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation. I have been informed by her Department that Directive (EU) 2019/770 on contracts for the supply of digital content and digital services (the 'Digital Content Directive') introduces new protections for consumers and sets out a range of quality and other requirements with which digital content and digital services must comply along with remedies for consumers where these requirements are not met. The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation will transpose the Directive into Irish law by 1st July 2021 and the legislation will come into force with effect from 1st January 2022.

Wage Subsidy Scheme

1160. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the percentage of childcare providers that have signed up for the WSCS to date; the reasons given by childcare providers to her Department for not signing up to the wage subsidy scheme as indicated in correspondence; if there are ongoing consultations with those providers not signed up in an effort to address challenges or barriers to signing up to the scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6952/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented situation that has required a series of emergency

responses from the Government.

I launched the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS) on 15 April. This scheme is a very significant measure to support the sector and reflects the particular impact the pandemic has had on early education and childcare providers.

I can confirm that as of 18 May, 3,815 childcare providers have signed up to participate in the TWSCS – this represents 84% of childcare providers. The TWSCS continues to remain open to providers to continue to sign up to and apply for supports under the TWSCS.

The Department, and Pobal on behalf of the Department, continues to engage with the childcare sector in order to assist and inform providers on the TWSCS. For example, the Department has issued a Frequently Asked Questions document to assist providers in their understanding of the TWSCS and Pobal has issued a number of communications on the Programmes Implementation Platform (PIP) to providers outlining the operation of and application process for the TWSCS.

In addition, Pobal operates an Early Years Provider Centre to respond to any queries that providers may have in relation to the TWSCS. The only substantive feedback received thus far has been with regard to clarification on certain scheme elements, such as interaction with the Revenue Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme. DCYA has worked with partners to address key issues and guidance material has been updated accordingly.

Childcare Services

1161. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of childcare providers registered with the new outreach childcare scheme for the children of front-line healthcare workers; the measures taken to address concerns with regard to the stated non-provision of insurance to providers that partake in the scheme; if she has considered registered childminders as part of the scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6953/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy will be aware that the Temporary Childcare Scheme for Essential Health Workers was cancelled on the 13th May.

My primary focus now, and that of my Department, is to work towards the significant challenges of a phased reopening of early learning and childcare facilities for 29th June, in line with the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

I have established an advisory group to support this process and I have chaired two meetings of this group.

My Department will be communicating with the wider childcare sector in the coming weeks as plans advance

Identifying essential workers, as referred to by the Deputy, is part of the wider Government effort to ensure that society and businesses are re-opened in a carefully managed and safe manner.

Childcare Services

1162. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the planning taking place to support the reopening of crèches; if crèches will be reopened on a rolling basis; if they will be re-opened in a smaller capacity; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6954/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): On Friday 1 May, the Government released its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, which sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions through five phases. The re-opening of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) services will be guided by this framework and will be underpinned by the Government's Return to Work Safely Protocol, expert advice, available evidence and consultation with ELC and SAC stakeholder representatives and providers themselves.

The future stages of the Roadmap's re-opening of ELC/SAC services are stated as follows:

Phase 3 (29 June), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of essential workers in a phased manner with social distancing and other requirements applying.

Phase 4 (20 July), opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of all other workers on a gradually increasing phased basis and slowly increasing thereafter.

The sector has many questions regarding how the Roadmap will be implemented to enable services to re-open. While the COVID-19 emergency called for overnight action on closures, it is my ambition that the phased re-opening will enable sufficient time and planning to re-open in an orderly, safe and sustainable manner. I would like to reassure providers, practitioners, parents and children that I will be doing my utmost to support the sector in offering as smooth a transition as possible to the phased and restricted re-opening of ELC and SAC services.

My Department is currently working with the sector to answer the many questions that exist. This is complex work and must balance a number of important issues, including those mentioned by the Deputy around capacity. Informed by NPHE and public health guidance, consideration is being given to a range of these issues, including:

- Minimising the public health risk, especially given the difficulty of maintaining social distancing among young children and those caring for them,

- Ensuring the need for any restrictions to be consistent with young children's well-being and development needs and for ELC and SAC provision at each phase to be child-centred

- Providing ELC for preschool children, meeting parental demand for ELC and SAC as the economy reopens, and meeting the commitment to retain places for families who paid for ELC and SAC before COVID-19, all while restricting capacity and thereby reducing adult-child ratios.

- Ensuring financial sustainability of the sector when capacity restrictions limit income and parents cannot afford to cover any higher costs with higher fees.

- Ensuring a sufficient number of qualified ELC and SAC practitioners, given likelihood of reduced adult-child ratios and existing challenges with recruitment and retention.

I am actively engaging with key stakeholders in the sector to make sure that the work on re-opening services is informed by the practical reality across the country. I have established and Chair an Advisory Group that includes representatives chosen by the sector, specifically the Association of Childhood Professionals, Community Forum, Early Childhood Ireland, National Childhood Network, PLÉ and Seas Suas. The group also includes Tusla, Pobal, SIPTU

and Childminding Ireland. The first meeting of this Advisory Group took place on 13 May and I held follow up meetings on 15 and 19 May. A schedule of weekly meetings has also been agreed.

The proposals for re-opening which are in development will have due regard to Public Health guidance over the phases of easing of restrictions. I am conscious that the proposed timelines are subject to further NPHE advice, and decisions from Government.

There are a number of key decisions to be made across Government that will impact significantly on the ELC and SAC sector, including the future of emergency measures such as the Revenue operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection operated Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and other business supports. The proposals for re-opening ELC and SAC services necessarily interact with these schemes and so I will be relying on whole of Government plans, which impact the ELC and SAC sector.

It is my fervent hope that every early education and childcare service around the country is currently considering how it can be part of helping Ireland get back to work, and how it can support children from June 29th in the very difficult circumstances they have experienced in recent months.

I will undertake to update the Deputy as soon as the work on re-opening services is at a more advanced stage.

Early Childhood Care and Education

1163. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she will be making funding available for July and August 2020 on a once-off basis to the ECCE-only sector and to other sessional and full-day providers in view of the funding challenges they will face at the end of June 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6955/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): My Department, in consultation with stakeholder representatives, is currently developing proposals for the on-going funding of early learning and care services, including the ECCE-only sector and other sessional providers.

I have established and Chair an Advisory Group that includes membership from across the sector, specifically the Association of Childhood Professionals, Childminding Ireland, Community Forum, Early Childhood Ireland, National Childhood Network, PLÉ, Pobal, Seas Seas, Tusla and SIPTU. The first meetings of this Advisory Group took place on 13, 15 and 19 May. A schedule of weekly meetings has been agreed.

There are a number of key decisions to be made across Government that will impact significantly on the ELC and SAC sector, including the continuation, introduction or cessation of emergency measures such as the Revenue operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection operated Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and other business supports. The proposals for re-opening ELC and SAC services necessarily interact with these existing schemes and so I will be relying on the continued close working relationships with other Ministers on whole of government plans, which impact the ELC and SAC sector.

Child and Family Agency

1164. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the reason Tusla does not have a record of the number of child sex abuse cases that were referred to An Garda Síochána for 2016 to 2019; the reason Tusla does not have a record of the outcome of the cases; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6984/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy is asking about an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

Town and Village Renewal Scheme

1165. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the amount allocated to each local authority under the town and village renewal scheme in 2018 and 2019; the amount paid to each local authority to date based on latest information for each allocation in tabular form; the percentage of the total amount paid out to date out of the amount allocated to each local authority in each such year based on latest data; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6256/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): The Town and Village Renewal Scheme is one of a number of measures designed to rejuvenate rural towns and villages throughout Ireland under my Department’s Rural Development Investment Programme. The Scheme is administered by the Local Authorities on behalf of my Department.

224 projects which were approved for funding of €21.3 million under the 2018 Town and Village Renewal Scheme; 156 projects were approved for funding of almost €15 million in October 2019 under the 2019 Scheme.

Tables 1 and 2 below outline the funding that was approved for each Local Authority in 2018 and 2019 respectively under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme, the amount that has been paid out to date, and the amount paid expressed as a percentage of the amount allocated. It should be noted that payments are made when projects meet agreed milestones.

Given the nature of the projects delivered under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme, it is expected that the projects approved in 2019 will not be completed, in the main, until 2021. The remaining projects approved under the 2018 scheme are expected to be finalised during 2020. However, the completion of some projects may also be delayed as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions.

Table 1: Details of 2018 T&V funding approved and paid by Local Authority up to 11 May 2020.

Local Authority area	Grant amount approved	Funding paid to 11 May 2020	% paid to 11 May 2020
Carlow	€786,118	€343,059	44%
Cavan	€530,000	€381,802	72%
Clare	€581,000	€478,340	82%
Cork	€1,001,800	€249,623	25%
Donegal	€1,100,000	€150,000	14%
Dublin	€697,960	€100,000	14%
Galway	€900,000	€698,783	78%
Kerry	€476,000	€115,893	24%

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Local Authority area	Grant amount approved	Funding paid to 11 May 2020	% paid to 11 May 2020
Kildare	€520,000	€260,000	50%
Kilkenny	€652,280	€0	0%
Laois	€872,094	€537,098	62%
Leitrim	€737,520	€523,820	71%
Limerick	€963,918	€342,666	36%
Longford	€593,856	€356,256	60%
Louth	€892,157	€390,690	44%
Mayo	€1,183,615	€395,615	33%
Meath	€670,834	€190,655	28%
Monaghan	€868,500	€310,935	36%
Offaly	€1,300,000	€911,087	70%
Roscommon	€880,000	€291,184	33%
Sligo	€1,138,400	€674,800	59%
Tipperary	€913,266	€376,033	41%
Waterford	€756,000	€349,069	46%
Westmeath	€452,000	€50,000	11%
Wexford	€1,334,798	€421,076	32%
Wicklow	€518,005	€278,124	54%
Total	€21,320,121	€9,176,607	43%

Table 2: Details of 2019 T&V funding approved and paid by Local Authority up to 11 May 2020.

T&V 2019	Grant Amount Approved	Funding paid to 11 May 2020	% funding paid to 11 May 2020
Carlow	€399,691	€0	0%
Cavan	€604,914	€0	0%
Clare	€721,109	€6,960	1%
Cork	€1,002,300	€0	0%
Donegal	€764,400	€0	0%
Dublin	€320,000	€0	0%
Galway	€752,000	€0	0%
Kerry	€810,486	€0	0%
Kildare	€312,164	€0	0%
Kilkenny	€391,600	€0	0%
Laois	€437,761	€0	0%
Leitrim	€324,511	€0	0%
Limerick	€585,101	€0	0%
Longford	€454,104	€0	0%
Louth	€338,000	€0	0%
Mayo	€838,533	€0	0%
Meath	€585,792	€0	0%
Monaghan	€569,537	€0	0%
Offaly	€700,000	€0	0%

T&V 2019	Grant Amount Approved	Funding paid to 11 May 2020	% funding paid to 11 May 2020
Roscommon	€688,000	€0	0%
Sligo	€564,000	€0	0%
Tipperary	€684,615	€0	0%
Waterford	€500,000	€0	0%
Westmeath	€700,000	€0	0%
Wexford	€691,206	€100,000	14%
Wicklow	€250,173	€0	0%
Total	€14,989,997	€106,960	1%

LEADER Programmes

1166. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the amount allocated to each LAG under the 2014-2020 LEADER programme; the amount expended annually under the 2014-2020 LEADER programme in each LAG; the percentage of the total spend to date out of the amount allocated to each LAG for the programme period; the amount expended to date in each LAG on project costs, administrative costs and other costs, by each LAG in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6257/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): LEADER is a multi-annual programme with a total budget of €250 million over the period 2014-2020. €225 million of this funding has been allocated as core funding to the Local Action Groups (LAGs) throughout the country who deliver the LEADER programme. This funding is allocated to the LAGs for the full period of the programme.

The remaining €25 million is available for thematic schemes to be delivered at a national level and is allocated as projects are approved.

Table 1 below provides details of all payments made to the LAGs on an annual basis.

Table 2 below provides details of:

- The budget allocations to the LAGs under the LEADER 2014-2020 programme, and
- The total spend by the LAGs broken down by:
 - the cost of developing their Local Development Strategies at the outset of the programme (preparatory support);
 - expenditure incurred on administration and on supporting the development of LEADER projects (administration & animation);
 - funding provided to LEADER projects; and
 - total spend expressed as a percentage of each LAG's budget allocation.

While the overall spend to date is 43% of the total allocation available to the LAGs, there continues to be a consistent increase in project payments over previous years. Over 1,400 project promoters, or 50%, have now received a Final Payment in respect of their project.

Project approvals have also steadily increased, with 2,911 projects approved to date to a value of over €112 million. A further 401 projects, requesting funding of almost €28 million,

are at earlier stages in the approvals process. Project payments under the programme will continue to increase as approved works are completed and claims for payment submitted. Payments can continue to be made beyond the 2014-2020 LEADER programming period in respect of projects approved before the end of 2020.

The figures provided do not include payments made under thematic schemes which are funded outside of the core budget allocated to each LAG.

Table 1: LEADER payments to LAGs for the period 2015-2020

Local Action Group	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Carlow	€20,000	€0	€256,148	€955,702	€1,325,592	€327,384
Cavan	€50,000	€62,741	€264,138	€676,779	€2,100,254	€684,729
Clare	€71,000	€202,336	€525,000	€937,913	€1,613,675	€811,449
Cork North	€15,000	€19,456	€422,197	€836,795	€985,750	€533,275
Cork South	€65,000	€0	€261,234	€465,774	€500,358	€236,619
Cork West	€135,240	€0	€362,953	€485,804	€726,069	€510,944
Donegal	€57,594	€35,362	€778,328	€2,353,037	€2,492,873	€895,847
Dublin Rural	€55,000	€0	€290,992	€714,709	€794,581	€428,993
Galway East	€0	€58,214	€427,142	€426,367	€1,332,857	€821,276
Galway West	€75,000	€60,000	€180,000	€292,284	€586,906	€331,078
Kerry	€15,000	€1,344	€811,249	€1,299,208	€2,867,905	€1,108,849
Kildare	€50,000	€0	€163,910	€314,922	€770,304	€468,976
Kilkenny	€54,725	€182,570	€600,559	€922,011	€929,727	€249,942
Laois	€25,000	€35,242	€282,636	€674,237	€994,508	€188,780
Leitrim	€25,000	€32,134	€298,277	€551,744	€1,155,333	€912,812
Limerick	€22,187	€26,267	€670,442	€1,245,753	€2,144,543	€1,006,048
Longford	€30,000	€0	€266,711	€394,024	€1,183,596	€523,367
Louth	€28,000	€21,913	€340,184	€455,037	€1,271,500	€618,584
Mayo	€107,000	€43,722	€896,552	€870,727	€3,035,308	€847,367
Meath	€40,000	€99,961	€317,904	€376,275	€916,318	€418,606
Monaghan	€58,296	€45,042	€260,822	€592,452	€1,378,475	€835,530
Offaly	€30,000	€43,481	€478,068	€1,288,187	€1,845,216	€946,145
Roscommon	€58,213	€70,559	€325,968	€588,565	€1,632,704	€437,311
Sligo	€15,000	€57,268	€502,405	€686,025	€1,222,544	€904,955
Tipperary	€20,000	€16,443	€525,103	€901,658	€2,627,304	€951,101
Waterford	€63,430	€55,779	€496,858	€1,824,877	€1,456,234	€411,846
Westmeath	€25,500	€26,872	€345,928	€611,855	€867,346	€993,109
Wexford	€15,000	€21,129	€443,303	€820,151	€2,034,838	€612,738
Wicklow	€25,000	€43,088	€328,839	€417,879	€913,483	€398,193
Total	€1,251,185	€1,260,921	€12,123,851	€22,980,756	€41,706,099	€18,415,854

Table 2: LEADER expenditure data as of 18 May 2020

Local Action Group	Total Allocation	Prep Support spend	Admin & Animation spend	Project spend	Total Spend	% spend
Carlow	€6,416,803	€20,000	€937,860	€1,926,967	€2,884,826	45%
Cavan	€9,022,286	€50,000	€1,089,558	€2,699,084	€3,838,642	43%
Clare	€8,920,225	€83,336	€1,876,000	€2,202,037	€4,161,372	47%
Cork North	€5,591,846	€15,000	€1,198,386	€1,599,087	€2,812,473	50%
Cork South	€3,831,303	€65,000	€832,613	€631,372	€1,528,985	40%
Cork West	€5,015,674	€135,240	€1,109,603	€976,166	€2,221,010	44%
Donegal	€13,413,878	€57,594	€2,363,279	€4,192,168	€6,613,041	49%
Dublin Rural	€6,370,438	€55,000	€1,127,593	€1,101,683	€2,284,276	36%
Galway East	€7,655,851	€159,488	€1,256,700	€1,649,668	€3,065,856	40%
Galway West	€4,540,033	€75,000	€715,000	€735,267	€1,525,267	34%
Kerry	€10,719,868	€16,344	€2,216,761	€3,870,450	€6,103,555	57%
Kildare	€5,261,600	€50,000	€783,601	€934,512	€1,768,112	34%
Kilkenny	€7,791,573	€57,295	€1,707,750	€1,174,489	€2,939,534	38%
Laois	€7,124,587	€35,191	€1,020,019	€1,145,192	€2,200,402	31%
Leitrim	€6,498,475	€25,000	€1,080,464	€1,869,835	€2,975,299	46%
Limerick	€9,776,594	€22,187	€2,082,053	€3,011,002	€5,115,241	52%
Longford	€7,597,623	€30,000	€1,097,945	€1,269,753	€2,397,698	32%
Louth	€6,101,862	€28,000	€1,088,853	€1,618,365	€2,735,219	45%
Mayo	€11,621,432	€119,238	€2,252,248	€3,429,191	€5,800,677	50%
Meath	€6,903,124	€40,000	€1,318,486	€810,578	€2,169,064	31%
Monaghan	€7,592,720	€58,296	€1,083,341	€2,028,981	€3,170,618	42%
Offaly	€8,536,764	€30,000	€1,429,601	€3,171,497	€4,631,098	54%
Roscommon	€8,852,659	€58,213	€1,335,646	€1,719,461	€3,113,320	35%
Sligo	€7,655,648	€15,000	€966,946	€2,406,250	€3,388,196	44%
Tipperary	€10,603,443	€20,000	€1,733,129	€3,288,479	€5,041,608	48%
Waterford	€8,022,796	€75,427	€1,222,992	€3,010,605	€4,309,024	54%
Westmeath	€7,384,206	€25,602	€1,203,805	€1,641,202	€2,870,610	39%
Wexford	€9,840,141	€15,000	€1,363,615	€2,568,545	€3,947,160	40%
Wicklow	€6,336,549	€35,794	€1,039,187	€1,051,503	€2,126,483	34%
Total	€225,000,000	€1,472,244	€38,533,035	€57,733,387	€97,738,666	43%

LEADER Programmes

1167. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of projects approved to date by each LAG under the 2014-2020 LEADER programme; and the number of approved projects that have received and not received project funding, respectively in tabular form. [6258/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): LEADER is a multi-annual programme which has a total budget of €250 million over the period to the end of 2020. €225 million of this funding has been allocated as core funding to each of the individual Local Action Groups (LAGs) who deliver LEADER. The remaining €25 million is avail-

able for schemes to be delivered at a national level and is allocated as projects are approved.

Table 1 below provides a breakdown of the number of core projects approved by each Local Action Group to date, as well as the number of approved projects which have received at least one payment, and the number of projects where no payment has yet issued.

Funding is drawn down as the projects start to incur expenditure and the project promoter submits claims for payment to the LAGs. The approved works, or phases of works, must be completed by the project promoter prior to any final or phased payments being made. A project promoter can opt to receive payment in one full final payment or up to five phased payments. It should also be noted that payments can continue to be drawn down after the end of the 2014-2020 LEADER programming period by projects which have been approved before the end of 2020.

Over 1,400, or 50%, of project promoters have now received a Final Payment in respect of their project.

The level of project activity under the LEADER programme continues to increase and, to date, 2,911 core projects have been approved for funding of over €112 million. A further 401 project applications, with a value of almost €29 million, are at various stages in the approval process.

In addition to the figures provided on the table below, over 150 LEADER Food Initiative and Co-operation projects have been approved at national level under the thematic schemes referred to above.

Table 1: LEADER core project approvals and payments issued as of 18 May, 2020, by LAG

Local Action Group	No. of Projects Approved	No. of Projects Funded	No. of Projects where no payment has issued
Carlow	45	34	11
Cavan	81	54	27
Clare	170	108	62
Cork North	75	48	27
Cork South	33	16	17
Cork West	34	24	10
Donegal	161	115	46
Dublin Rural	63	43	20
Galway East	96	45	51
Galway West	59	38	21
Kerry	320	187	133
Kildare	37	22	15
Kilkenny	96	58	38
Laois	85	53	32
Leitrim	102	66	36
Limerick	98	68	30
Longford	88	52	36
Louth	103	74	29
Mayo	155	108	47

Local Action Group	No. of Projects Approved	No. of Projects Funded	No. of Projects where no payment has issued
Meath	86	37	49
Monaghan	58	39	19
Offaly	157	116	41
Roscommon	72	37	35
Sligo	128	80	48
Tipperary	162	105	57
Waterford	71	49	22
Westmeath	88	53	35
Wexford	122	82	40
Wicklow	66	35	31
Grand Total	2,911	1,846	1,065

Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

1168. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the estimated amount of funding to be allocated to the rural regeneration and development fund over the lifetime of National Development Plan 2018-2027; the amount allocated in each year over the 2018-2020 period to the fund; the amount of funding allocated for each approved project in 2018 and 2019; and the amount issued in payments to date. [6259/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): Under Project Ireland 2040, the Government has committed €1 billion to the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund over a 10 year period to support rural economic development and help build strong communities. The Fund has been allocated €315m over the period 2019 to 2022 and the various allocations over that period will be confirmed as part of the annual budgetary process. €52 million was allocated to the Fund for 2019 and €53 million is allocated for 2020.

Following the conclusion of the first call under the Fund in February 2019, a total of 84 successful projects had been announced, with funding of €86m provided from the Fund to support projects worth a total of €117m. Under the second call concluded in November 2019, another 26 projects were allocated funding of €62 million from the Fund. These 26 projects will deliver total investment of €97 million. Table 1 sets out the list of projects and the amount of funding which were approved under both calls.

Progress continues to be made on the implementation of the successful projects. To date, €31.8 million has been drawn down from the Fund by 66 separate projects. Now that's the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business and Return to Work Safely Protocol are in place, I look forward to further progress in the implementation of projects over the coming weeks and months.

The second call for Category 2 projects relating to project development and enabling initiatives closed on the 28th February 2020. My Department is currently engaged in the assessment process in relation to the applications, carried out in conjunction with the Project Advisory Board for the Fund, which is comprised of representatives from key Government Departments and independent experts.

Table 1. List of projects which were approved for RRDF Funding under the first and second calls.

Questions - Written Answers

Project Title	Category	Location	County	Lead Applicant	RRDF Funding
Great Southern Greenway Limerick	1	Abbeyfeale, New-castlewest, Rathkeale, Ardagh	Limerick	Limerick City and County Council	€2,724,657.00
gteic Hub An Spidéal	1	An Spidéal	Galway	Údarás na Gaeltachta	€548,887.00
Ardee Castle	1	Ardee Castle	Louth	Louth County Council	€2,147,000.00
Athenry / Bia Innovator	1	Athenry	Galway	Galway County Council	€3,554,000.00
An Bealach Project	1	Ballaghdarreen	Roscommon	Roscommon Integrated Development Company Ltd	€1,656,750.00
Ballinrobe Regeneration	1	Ballinrobe	Mayo	Mayo County Council	€825,000.00
International Mountain Biking Project	1	Ballyhoura, Coolaney, Ticknock, Ballinastoe, Slieve Blooms	Limerick, Cork, Sligo, Dublin, Wicklow, Offaly, Laois	Coillte	€10,262,900.00
Banteer Amenity Project	1	Banteer	Cork	IRD Duhallow CLG	€1,128,000.00
gteic Hubs	1	Béal a' Mhuirthhead	Mayo	Údarás na Gaeltachta	€795,062.00
Borris Railway Viaduct	1	Borris	Carlow	Carlow County Council	€654,820.00
Boyle Regeneration	1	Boyle Town	Roscommon	Roscommon County Council	€1,705,705.00
Callan Town Regeneration	1	Callan Town	Kilkenny	Kilkenny County Council	€561,750.00
Castlebayney Enterprise Centre	1	Castleblayney	Monaghan	Monaghan County Council	€2,138,560.00
An Chistin Project	1	Castlerea	Roscommon	Roscommon County Council	€1,545,000.00
Claremorris Indoor Sports Facility	1	Claremorris	Mayo	Sligo LEADER Partnership CLG	€2,100,000.00
Cootehill Industrial Estate	1	Cootehill	Cavan	Cavan County Council	€867,174.00
Edgeworthstown Regeneration	1	Edgeworthstown	Longford	Longford County Council	€1,269,019.00
Athy / Ernest Shackleton Project	1	Emily Square, Athy	Kildare	Kildare County Council	€2,707,500.00
Emo Court	1	Emo, Emo Court	Laois	Office of Public Works	€1,200,000.00
Ennistymon Innovation Centre	1	Ennistymon	Clare	Clare County Council	€1,023,300.00

Project Title	Category	Location	County	Lead Applicant	RRDF Funding
gteic Gaoth Dobhair	1	Gaoth Dobhair	Donegal	Udaras na Gaeltachta	€1,500,000.00
Glenbrohane Local Hub	1	Glenbrohane	Limerick	Ballyhoura Development CLG	€626,369.00
Historic Granard Motte Project	1	Granard	Longford	Longford County Council	€2,872,434.00
Johnstown Castle & Gardens	1	Johnstown Castle	Wexford	TEAGASC	€658,696.00
Vandeleur Estate	1	Kilrush	Clare	Clare County Council	€1,720,000.00
Kinsale Library Project	1	Kinsale	Cork	Cork County Council	€2,157,375.00
The Seaworld Project	1	Lahinch	Clare	Clare County Council	€2,860,000.00
Loophead Visitor Attraction	1	Loophead	Clare	Clare County Council	€868,500.00
Murroe Community Hub	1	Murroe	Limerick	Ballyhoura Development CLG	€3,816,451.00
National Parks	1	National Parks (multiple)	(6) Clare; Donegal; Galway; Kerry; Mayo; Wicklow	Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht	€3,915,000.00
National Centre of Excellence for Surfing	1	Strandhill	Sligo	Sligo County Council	€615,752.00
Swan Park	1	Swan Park, Buncrana	Donegal	Donegal County Council	€1,728,042.00
Thomastown Regeneration	1	Thomastown	Kilkenny	Kilkenny County Council	€2,080,486.00
Tipperary Town Regeneration	1	Tipperary Town	Tipperary	Tipperary County Council	€600,000.00
Tullycross Residential Education Centre	1	Tullycross, Renvyle	Galway	Western Development Commission	€1,728,000.00
Valentia Trans-Atlantic Cable Station	1	Valentia Island	Kerry	Kerry County Council	€1,270,000.00
DigiWest	1	Various	Donegal, Sligo, Mayo, Roscommon	Western Development Commission	€644,734.00
The Yeats Trail	1	Yeats Trail	Sligo	Sligo County Council	€500,000.00
Virginia Civic Centre	1	Virginia	Cavan	Cavan County Council	€3,963,525.00

Questions - Written Answers

Project Title	Category	Location	County	Lead Applicant	RRDF Funding
Multifunctional Performance Auditorium at Cnoc na Gaoithe Cultural Centre, Tulla	1	Tulla	Clare	Clare County Council	€900,000.00
Briery Gap Theater and Library	1	Macroom	Cork	Cork County Council	€2,000,000.00
Kanturk Regeneration - Phase 1	1	Kanturk	Cork	Cork County Council	€619,500.00
Killybegs 2040 - Town Centre Regeneration Project	1	Killybegs	Donegal	Donegal County Council	€3,631,758.00
Ailt an Chor-ráin (Burtonport)/ Oilean Árann Mhór (Arranmore Island) - Harbour to Island Regeneration	1	Burtonport/ Arranmore Island	Donegal	Donegal County Council	€3,089,199.00
Regeneration Loughrea, Breaking through	1	Loughrea	Galway	Galway County Council	€1,628,879.00
Listowel Food Hub	1	Listowel	Kerry	North East West Kerry Development NEWKD	€1,365,226.00
Barrow Blueway, 46km	1	Barrow Blueway	Kildare, Laois	Kildare County Council	€5,067,941.00
The Junction, Ballinamore - Regeneration of Ballinamore	1	Ballinamore	Leitrim	Leitrim County Council	€1,728,075.00
Manorhamilton Public Realm improvement works including re-imagining employment and Enterprise Lands	1	Manorhamilton	Leitrim	Leitrim County Council	€1,613,250.00
The Yard, Abbeyshrule - Community and Economic Hub	1	Abbeyshrule	Longford	Longford County Council	€522,265.71
Áras Scéalta an Atlantaigh - Visitor Centre and Tourism Hub	1	Aghleam	Mayo	Udaras na Gaeltachta	€1,879,350.00
Ballintubber Abbey Culture and Heritage Visitor Centre	1	Claremorris	Mayo	Mayo County Council	€2,677,352.00

Project Title	Category	Location	County	Lead Applicant	RRDF Funding
Clew Bay Greenway Project	1		Mayo	Mayo County Council	€1,924,800.00
Trim Library and Cultural Centre	1	Trim	Meath	Meath County Council	€3,718,670.00
Kells Creative Placemaking (Phase 1) - Kells Courthouse Cultural Hub and Kells Printworks and Topography Centre	1	Kells	Meath	Meath County Council	€992,834.00
Castleblayney Market Square Regeneration	1	Castleblaney	Monaghan	Monaghan County Council	€2,611,150.00
Edenderry Regeneration - Phase 1	1	Edenderry	Offaly	Offaly County Council	€522,207.00
Life Sciences Innovation Hub and Soft Landing Space	1	Athlone	Roscommon	Roscommon County Council	€2,751,544.16
Roscrea Enterprise, Digital and Social Impact Hub	1	Roscrea	Tipperary	North Tipperary Development Company	€1,925,546.00
Fetherd Town Park	1	Fethard	Tipperary	Tipperary County Council	€2,600,000.00
Templemore Town Hall: Enterprise and Cultural Centre, with associated Civic Plaza	1	Templemore	Tipperary	Tipperary County Council	€2,107,500.00
Ireland's Global Garden - Mount Congreve Estate	1	Kilmeaden	Waterford	Waterford City and County Council	€3,726,000.00
Wexfordia - the New Ross Tourism Transformation	1	New Ross	Wexford	Wexford County Council	€5,560,000.00
Making Baltinglass the Hub for South West Wicklow	1	Baltinglass	Wicklow	Wicklow County Council	€2,675,226.00
Anne's Grove	2	Anne's Grove	Cork	OPW	€375,000.00
Ardee Regeneration	2	Ardee	Louth	Louth County Council	€526,743.75
Kildare Town Centre Regeneration	2	Athy	Kildare	Kildare County Council	€80,000.00
Coláiste Íosagáin Campus	2	Baile Bhuirne/Coláiste Íosagáin	Cork	Udaras na Gaeltachta	€180,000.00

Questions - Written Answers

Project Title	Category	Location	County	Lead Applicant	RRDF Funding
Baile na Fheirtéaraigh Development	2	Baile na Fheirtéaraigh	Kerry	Údarás na Gaeltachta	€292,500.00
Creative Studios Ballaghdarreen	2	Ballaghdarreen	Roscommon	Roscommon Integrated Development Company Ltd	€20,250.00
Altmont House and Gardens	2	Ballon	Carlow	OPW	€450,000.00
Ballybay Regeneration	2	Ballybay	Monaghan	Monaghan County Council	€410,400.00
Kenmare	2	Kenmare	Kerry	Kerry County Council	€275,000* * Project cancelled
Ballydesmond	2	Ballydesmond	Cork	Cork County Council	€56,250.00
Ballyjamesduff Regeneration Strategy	2	Ballyjamesduff	Cavan	Cavan County Council	€90,000.00
Blackwater River Valley	2	Blackwater Valley	Waterford	Waterford Leader Partnership	€128,842.00
Boyne Navigation and Greenway	2	Boyne Navigation and Greenway	Meath	Meath County Council	€845,250.00
Carrickmacross Town Centre Renewal	2	Carrickmacross	Monaghan	Monaghan County Council	€632,000.00
The Clones Terminus	2	Cavan to Monaghan	Cavan to Monaghan	Waterways Ireland	€325,000.00
Clones Regeneration	2	Clones	Monaghan	Monaghan County Council	€377,250.00
Cootehill Technology Park	2	Cootehill	Cavan	Cavan County Council	€56,000.00
Digital Innovation Hub Strategy	2	Cork County	Cork	Cork County Council	€206,168.00
Dingle Workhouse Masterplan	2	Dingle Workhouse	Kerry	Údarás na Gaeltachta	€415,000.00
Ireland's National Parks	2	Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Clare, Kerry, Wicklow	Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Clare, Kerry, Wicklow	Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht - NPWS	€1,466,250.00
Doolin Pier	2	Doolin	Clare	Clare County Council	€465,571.00
Dunmore Regeneration	2	Dunmore	Galway	Galway County Council	€960,909.00
Edenderry Masterplan	2	Edenderry	Offaly	Offaly County Council	€75,000.00

Project Title	Category	Location	County	Lead Applicant	RRDF Funding
Community Facilities Enfield	2	Enfield	Meath	Meath County Council	€726,000.00
The Cliff Bath House	2	Enniscrone	Sligo	Sligo County Council	€131,250.00
Esmonde Street Gorey	2	Ferrycarraig and the Hook Peninsuala	Wexford	Wexford County Council	€1,087,340.00
Úibh Ráthach Action Plan	2	Gaeltacht Uíbh Ráthach/ Iveragh Task-force	Kerry	Údarás na Gaeltachta	€174,351.00
Market House Gorey	2	Gorey	Wexford	Wexford County Council	€429,145.37
Ferrycarraig and the Hook Peninsuala	2	Gorey	Wexford	Wexford County Council	€95,224.00
Inis Cealtra Island	2	Inis Cealtra	Clare	Clare County Council	€920,500.00
Kell's Heritage Development	2	Kells	Meath	Meath County Council	€210,000.00
Community Shops Kilkenny	2	Kilkenny	Kilkenny	Kilkenny LEADER Partnership	€60,000.00
Ocean Innovation Centre Ireland	2	Killybegs	Donegal	Letterkenny Institute of Technology	€293,436.00
Kinnegad Regeneration	2	Kinnegad	Westmeath	Westmeath County Council	€600,000.00
Kinvara Boardwalk and Walkway	2	Kinvara	Galway	Galway County Council	€124,781.25
Smart Green Mohill	2	Mohill	Leitrim	Leitrim County Council	€37,500.00
Monasterevin Town Centre Regeneration	2	Monasterevin	Kildare	Kildare County Council	€78,000.00
Geopark Development	2	Multi Location	Mayo, Galway	Geological Survey Ireland	€969,387.00
Cycle Network	2	Multi Location	Mayo	Mayo County Council	€75,000.00
Wild Atlantic Way	2	Multiple	Clare / Kerry	Fáilte Ireland	€666,300.00
Enterprise Hub New Ross	2	New Ross	Wexford	Wexford County Council	€328,407.00
West Limerick Tourism Gateway	2	Newcastle West	Limerick	Limerick City and County Council	€330,000.00
Rathormac Strategy for Development	2	Rathormac	Cork	Avondhu Blackwater partnership CLG	€122,025.00
Trim Castle	2	Trim	Meath	OPW	€262,500.00

Project Title	Category	Location	County	Lead Applicant	RRDF Funding
Tuam Regeneration Strategy	2	Tuam	Galway	Galway County Council	€175,000.00
Tourism Experiences	2	Westport and Cong	Mayo	Mayo County Council	€56,000.00

Departmental Contracts

1169. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if his Department has engaged the use of external consultants from 1 January 2020 to date; the details and costs of such engagements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5536/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): The following table provides the information requested by the Deputy.

Name of Consultant	Costs of such engagements	Purpose of Consultancy	Term: Date external consultant was engaged 1 Jan 2020 to date.
National University of Ireland, Maynooth	€16,463.50 excluding VAT	CLÁR Programme Review	17 April 2020
INDECON International Economic Consultants	€78,450 excluding VAT	Provision of Market Research for the Development of a Philanthropy Policy	15 April 2020 to 31 December 2020

Community Development Projects

1170. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if he is considering ways to fund many rural and community organisations whose programmes and funding have been cut due to the cancellation of programmes through Covid-19 such as an organisation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6065/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): My Department continues to provide funding through its schemes and programmes to Local Development Companies, such as the organisation referenced by the Deputy.

The LEADER 2014-2020 programme remains operational through the COVID-19 crisis and payments continue to be made to the Local Action Groups, their Implementing Partners and to project promoters. Local Development Companies such as the one mentioned by the Deputy continue to receive ongoing financial support, for their operating and personnel costs, to enable them continue to deliver the LEADER programme in their area through the COVID-19 crisis.

Through the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP), the Department provides funding to Local Development Companies, such as the organisation referenced by the Deputy. This allows Local Development Companies to carry out work to tackle poverty and social exclusion, both through one-to-one interventions and other initiatives. SICAP is co-funded from the European Social Fund (ESF) as part of the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020. The organisation referenced by the Deputy delivers SICAP in County Westmeath. The 2020 budget allocation for Westmeath is €804,985 and this is being paid out as expected during the year.

20 May 2020

My Department is also providing additional vital supports to rural and community organisations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is supporting the following initiatives:

- The Community Services Programme, or CSP, currently supports over 400 community organisations. My Department is committed to supporting these organisations during this time and has recently developed the 2020 Support Fund. The Fund will provide an additional once off payment to cover a 12-week period from 26 March 2020. For full-time CSP supported employees, an enhanced CSP contribution will be provided so that employers can pay a maximum of €350 net per week, with a proportionate amount for part-time CSP supported employees.

- On 16 March 2020, my Department launched the COVID-19 Government Action Plan in partnership with other Departments, State agencies and our extensive network of community and voluntary organisations. These initiatives provide support for volunteering, funding to ALONE for their crisis telephone support line, and an email helpdesk facility to assist smaller community groups with their queries.

- On 9 April 2020, an initial €2.5 million COVID-19 Emergency Fund was introduced to provide immediate and urgently needed funding to community and voluntary groups that are participating in the Government's "Community Call" initiative which is being led by the Local Authorities.

- On Friday 8 May 2020, I announced a €35 million Covid-19 Stability Fund, from the Dormant Accounts Fund, to provide a level of support to qualifying organisations who are most in need and have seen their trading and/or fund-raising income drop significantly during the crisis.

- The Fund opened for applications on 11 May 2020. The closing date is 20 May 2020 at 5pm. Further details can be found on my Department's website at www.gov.ie/DRCD or the website of Pobal at

<https://www.pobal.ie/new-covid-19-support-scheme-for-community-voluntary-organisations-charities-and-social-enterprises-announced/>

- Applications to the scheme can be located on the link: COVID-19 Stability Fund:

<https://www.pobal.ie/programmes/covid-19-cv-stability-scheme/>

- There is also a commitment to a Philanthropy Fund (Innovate Together), which will focus on supporting responses to the COVID-19 crisis that require innovative and adaptive solutions to existing and emerging challenges. The Fund is supported by a commitment of €5 million from my Department through the support of the Dormant Accounts Fund. Innovate Together is a collaboration between Government, philanthropists and social innovations. Social Innovation Fund Ireland pledges to raise additional significant philanthropic funds for this initiative. The deadline for applications is 27 May 2020 at 5pm. Details can be found at the link:

<http://www.socialinnovation.ie/innovate-together/>

- The organisation referred to by the Deputy can check their eligibility for the above supports through the Department or from the Pobal website links provided.

- In addition to the measures which have been introduced by my Department for community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises, the Government has put in place a range of supports and guidance for businesses impacted by COVID-19. A downloadable guide to these supports and their eligibility criteria is available here. Details of enhanced government supports for businesses announced on 2 May 2020 are available here. Enquiries can be directed to the relevant contact points listed in the material.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1171. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the Covid-19 supports and funds announced by his Department or State agency under his remit; the application process involved for each; the deadlines for each such support; and if primary legislation will need to be enacted to operationalise the supports. [6251/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): The Government is aware of the challenges facing community and voluntary organisations and is committed to working closely with the sector in managing through these, recognising that it will require a whole of Government approach.

In this context, my Department launched the COVID-19 Government Action Plan to support the community response on 20th March. This Plan, which was put together in partnership with other government departments, State agencies and our extensive network of community and voluntary organisations, sets out areas of initial focus in supporting a community response to COVID-19. These initiatives provide support for volunteering, funding to ALONE for their crisis telephone support line and an email helpdesk facility to assist smaller community groups with their queries.

My Department has also put in place the COVID-19 Emergency Fund to support the community response. The €2.5m fund provides immediate and urgently needed funding to community and voluntary groups that are participating in the Government's "Community Call" initiative, which is being led by the Local Authorities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Local Authorities are administering this fund. Further detail, including allocations by local authority area is available at this link

In addition my Department recently announced a package of supports for Community and Voluntary Organisations, Charities and Social Enterprises. The funding package is being made available through the support of the Dormant Accounts Fund, which is specifically set aside to support initiatives which will benefit the most disadvantaged groups in society. It includes a Stability Fund of €35 million and a Philanthropy Fund of €5 million.

Details of the Stability Fund including application details can be found on the Departments website at

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/60d32b-the-departments-response-to-covid-19-and-the-community-call/>

The Innovate Together Philanthropy Fund was opened on 13th May, 2020. The focus of the Fund is on supporting innovative responses to the Covid-19 crisis and is supported by a commitment of €5 million from my Department via the Dormant Accounts Fund. Social Innovation Fund Ireland pledges to raise additional philanthropic funds for this initiative and is responsible for the administration of the Fund with oversight from my Department. Applications are open to established charities, social enterprises and to local, regional and national voluntary groups and organisations who are based in Ireland and who are delivering services to the most vulnerable communities immediately impacted by COVID-19.

The first round of applications for the Innovate Together Fund opened on Wednesday 13th May and will close for applications on Wednesday 27th May at 5 pm. Two additional application rounds are planned for June and September of this year. Further details including application forms for the fund are available at www.socialinnovation.ie/innovate-together and queries can also be directed to innovatetogether@socialinnovation.ie

20 May 2020

The Community Services Programme (CSP), currently supports over 400 community organisations and my Department is fully committed to continuing to support those organisations. My Department has put in place an additional CSP Support Fund for 2020 which will provide an additional once off payment to many of these organisations to cover a 12 week period from 26th March 2020, ensuring that they can pay their full-time CSP supported employees a maximum of €350 net per week, with a proportionate amount for part-time CSP supported employees.

All of the supports put in place by my Department are operational immediately and none require primary legislation. In addition, assurances have been provided in relation to the continuation of exchequer funding supports for organisations in the sector. It is also worth mentioning that the Government Wage Subsidy Scheme will support employers in the sector to retain staff who are employed under non-exchequer funding sources.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1172. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the package of supports for community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises, including the Covid-19 stability fund; and the application process involved and deadlines for each such support. [6252/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): The Government is aware of the challenges facing community and voluntary organisations and is committed to working closely with the sector in managing through these, recognising that it will require a whole of Government approach.

In this context, my Department launched the COVID-19 Government Action Plan to support the community response on 20th March. This Plan, which was put together in partnership with other government departments, State agencies and our extensive network of community and voluntary organisations, sets out areas of initial focus in supporting a community response to COVID-19. These initiatives provide support for volunteering, funding to ALONE for their crisis telephone support line and an email helpdesk facility to assist smaller community groups with their queries.

My Department has also put in place the COVID-19 Emergency Fund to support the community response. The €2.5m fund provides immediate and urgently needed funding to community and voluntary groups that are participating in the Government's "Community Call" initiative, which is being led by the Local Authorities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Local Authorities are administering this fund. Further detail, including allocations by local authority area is available at this link

In addition my Department recently announced a package of supports for Community and Voluntary Organisations, Charities and Social Enterprises. The funding package is being made available through the support of the Dormant Accounts Fund, which is specifically set aside to support initiatives which will benefit the most disadvantaged groups in society. It includes a Stability Fund of €35 million and a Philanthropy Fund of €5 million.

Details of the Stability Fund including application details can be found on the Departments website at

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/60d32b-the-departments-response-to-covid-19-and-the-community-call/>

The Innovate Together Fund was opened on 13th May, 2020. The focus of the Fund is

on supporting innovative responses to the Covid-19 crisis and is supported by a commitment of €5 million from my Department via the Dormant Accounts Fund. Social Innovation Fund Ireland pledges to raise additional philanthropic funds for this initiative and is responsible for the administration of the Fund with oversight from my Department. Applications are open to established charities, social enterprises and to local, regional and national voluntary groups and organisations who are based in Ireland and who are delivering services to the most vulnerable communities immediately impacted by COVID-19.

The first round of applications opened on Wednesday 13th May and will close for applications on Wednesday 27th May at 5 pm. Two additional application rounds are planned for June and September of this year. Further details including application forms for the fund are available at www.socialinnovation.ie/innovate-together and queries can also be directed to innovatetogether@socialinnovation.ie

The Community Services Programme (CSP), currently supports over 400 community organisations and my Department is fully committed to continuing to support those organisations. My Department has put in place an additional Support Fund for 2020 which will provide an additional once off payment to many of these organisations to cover a 12 week period from 26th March 2020, ensuring that they can pay their full-time CSP supported employees a maximum of €350 net per week, with a proportionate amount for part-time CSP supported employees.

My Department is continuing to liaise with representatives of the community and voluntary, charity and social enterprise sectors and with other Departments with relevant policy responsibility in relation to the challenges faced at this time. Assurances have been provided in relation to the continuation of exchequer funding supports for organisations in the sector. It is also worth mentioning that the Government Wage Subsidy Scheme announced recently will support employers in the sector to retain staff who are employed under non-exchequer funding sources.

Community Development Initiatives

1173. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when it is expected community centres will open; the position with regard to a centre (details supplied); if funding supports will be provided to community centres to assist them to reopen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6333/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): The government has published a Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business to ease the COVID-19 restrictions and reopen Ireland’s economy and society in a phased manner.

There is no set date for the reopening of all community centres in Ireland. The opening for each community centre will depend on the activities and facilities available there. The roadmap provides more detail and is available on the following link:

<https://www.gov.ie/roadmap>

The community centre referenced is closed to the public at present due to Covid-19. The centre manager attends the centre each day for a reduced period of time (mainly for admin work) and is also the contact for the Community Call helpline.

I am aware that this centre has specific exceptional funding requirements for fire safety works. My Department provided a funding contribution of €20,000 matched by Fingal Local Authority towards the costs of these works. This essential fire compartmentation work is due to begin after 18th May while the centre remains closed in compliance with Government

guidelines.

More generally, community facilities are funded from a range of different sources across different Government Departments and agencies. My Department supports the centre referenced under its Community Services Programme (CSP) with €184,264 allocated to it for 2020. In addition, my Department also recently developed a 2020 Support Fund which provides an additional once off payment to CSP organisations to cover a 12 week period from 26th March 2020, ensuring that they can pay their full-time CSP supported employees a maximum of €350 net per week, with a proportionate amount for part-time CSP supported employees. The centre was paid an additional €5,293 under the Fund.

In addition, my Department recently announced a package of supports for Community and Voluntary Organisations, Charities and Social Enterprises. The funding package is being made available through the support of the Dormant Accounts Fund, which is specifically set aside to support initiatives which will benefit the most disadvantaged groups in society. It includes a Stability Fund of €35 million and a Philanthropy Fund of €5 million.

Details of the Stability Fund are available at

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/60d32b-the-departments-response-to-covid-19-and-the-community-call>

Further details on the philanthropy fund are available at www.socialinnovation.ie/innovate-together. Some community centres may be eligible for this funding, depending on the activities and facilities that they make available.

Community Development Projects

1174. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if his attention has been drawn to the challenges facing many in the community sector with the Covid-19 pandemic; and the specific supports he plans to put in place for projects that are hoping to re-open especially regarding funding and sustainability difficulties following the crisis. [6778/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): The Government is aware of the challenges facing community and voluntary organisations and is committed to working closely with the sector in managing through these, recognising that it will require a whole of Government approach.

In this context, my Department launched the COVID-19 Government Action Plan to support the community response on 20th March. This Plan, which was put together in partnership with other government departments, State agencies and our extensive network of community and voluntary organisations, sets out areas of initial focus in supporting a community response to COVID-19. These initiatives provide support for volunteering, funding to ALONE for their crisis telephone support line and an email helpdesk facility to assist smaller community groups with their queries.

My Department has also put in place the COVID-19 Emergency Fund to support the community response. The €2.5m fund provides immediate and urgently needed funding to community and voluntary groups that are participating in the Government's "Community Call" initiative, which is being led by the Local Authorities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Local Authorities are administering this fund. Further detail, including allocations by local authority area is available at this link

In addition my Department recently announced a package of supports for Community and Voluntary Organisations, Charities and Social Enterprises. The funding package is being made available through the support of the Dormant Accounts Fund, which is specifically set aside to support initiatives which will benefit the most disadvantaged groups in society. It includes a Stability Fund of €35 million and a Philanthropy Fund of €5 million.

Details of the Stability Fund including application details can be found on the Departments website at

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/60d32b-the-departments-response-to-covid-19-and-the-community-call/>

The Innovate Together Fund was opened on 13th May, 2020. The focus of the Fund is on supporting innovative responses to the Covid-19 crisis and is supported by a commitment of €5 million from my Department via the Dormant Accounts Fund. Social Innovation Fund Ireland pledges to raise additional philanthropic funds for this initiative and is responsible for the administration of the Fund with oversight from my Department. Applications are open to established charities, social enterprises and to local, regional and national voluntary groups and organisations who are based in Ireland and who are delivering services to the most vulnerable communities immediately impacted by COVID-19.

The first round of applications opened on Wednesday 13th May and will close for applications on Wednesday 27th May at 5 pm. Two additional application rounds are planned for June and September of this year. Further details including application forms for the fund are available at *www.socialinnovation.ie/innovate-together* and queries can also be directed to *innovatetogether@socialinnovation.ie*

The Community Services Programme (CSP), currently supports over 400 community organisations and my Department is fully committed to continuing to support those organisations. My Department has put in place an additional Support Fund for 2020 which will provide an additional once off payment to many of these organisations to cover a 12 week period from 26th March 2020, ensuring that they can pay their full-time CSP supported employees a maximum of €350 net per week, with a proportionate amount for part-time CSP supported employees.

My Department is continuing to liaise with representatives of the community and voluntary, charity and social enterprise sectors and with other Departments with relevant policy responsibility in relation to the challenges faced at this time. Assurances have been provided in relation to the continuation of exchequer funding supports for organisations in the sector. It is also worth mentioning that the Government Wage Subsidy Scheme announced recently will support employers in the sector to retain staff who are employed under non-exchequer funding sources.

Departmental Contracts

1175. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the amount spent on external consultants by his Department in 2019; the average hourly rate; if caps or limits on such spending are in place; the way in which conflicts of interest are managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7287/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): In 2019, a total of €324,839 was spent on the provision of consultancy services to aid the work of my Department, including informing policy development.

The hourly rate varies across consultancies and is dependent on the type of consultancy in

question and whether a fixed project fee is applicable.

The Department has detailed guidance in place with regard to procurement of goods and services, including consultancies. Consultants are engaged only when absolutely necessary, with appropriate monitoring of outputs throughout the contract.

Expenditure on consultants is monitored regularly to ensure it remains on profile and within designated budget. All planned consultancies over €25,000 are subject to approval by the Department's Management Board which ensures effective oversight of all consultancies and appropriate budget management.

Consultancies are procured by open competitive tendering processes in accordance with EU and national rules. In line with this, the Department makes use of the framework agreements put in place by the Office of Government Procurement wherever possible. The use of framework agreements ensures value for money, that hourly consultancy rates are capped at stated levels, and that there is transparency and fairness in the procurement process.

It is also important to note that at all times officials operate in the context of other relevant guidelines and statutory requirements. Section 14 of the Civil Service Code of Standards and Behaviour sets out the requirements, of officials, in terms of conflicts or potential conflicts of interest with Departmental Business. Breaches of the Code are subject to disciplinary action.

The Standards in Public Office and Ethics in Public Office legislation deal comprehensively with standards required of civil servants, including those relating to probity, integrity and potential conflicts of interests.

Finally, procurement practices are also subject to audit and scrutiny under the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act 1993 and Accounting Officers are publicly accountable for expenditure incurred.

Company Closures

1176. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she met with the staff of a company (details supplied) to discuss the recent announcement regarding the closing of its outlets; if the staff have an entitlement to redundancy from their former employer; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5797/20]

1214. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she has engaged with representatives of the employees of a company (details supplied) to ensure that the company is complying with all legal requirements in the treatment of its employees; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5879/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1176 and 1214 together.

Firstly, I would like to say that my thoughts are with all workers faced with the prospect of closure and job losses at this difficult time. With the exception of grocery outlets, the retail sector has been particularly affected by the measures we have had to take in response to the spread of Covid-19. Having come through a number of turbulent years and an examinership process, it must be difficult for Debenhams workers to now face redundancy. I applaud their efforts to ensure that they get the best outcome possible from the situation. I wish to assure the affected workers that my Department is available through its Intreo service to assist them in whatever way we can in terms of income supports and job-seeking over the coming weeks and months.

I want to assure everybody that the my Department is assisting the affected workers through its Intreo service to help them in whatever way we can in terms of income supports and job-seeking over the coming weeks and months. Indeed over the past number of weeks officials from my Department have engaged with both officials from Mandate and with the Human Resource management team in Debenhams to ensure that all workers have received their due entitlements from my Department.

My officials are also available to assist these workers in the job search efforts over the period ahead and with advice on further education and training options that will help them to find work within their sector or in other sectors where work opportunities will become available as the economy improves over the period ahead.

Furthermore, the redundancy and insolvency section of my Department has already engaged with the liquidators appointed to Debenhams and is continuing to work with them to ensure that all claims in respect of employees are dealt with expeditiously.

Since the announcement of the liquidation of Debenhams there have been calls on the Government to intervene in or halt the liquidation of the company and to ensure that employees of Debenhams receive enhanced redundancy payments. Employee representatives have also called for the 30 day mandatory consultation period to be extended.

The Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation has been clear that she, as the Minister responsible for company law legislation, has no statutory power to intervene in a court supervised liquidation. A company is permitted to initiate a voluntary winding up where it has complied with requirements of the Companies Act 2014.

I have been asked by the Mandate Trade Union to utilise my powers in accordance with Section 15 of the Protection of Employment Act 1977. In this regard, I sought urgent legal advice from the Attorney General in relation to those powers as they pertain to a court appointed liquidator. I received those advices yesterday and they are unequivocal.

I am advised that I, as Minister, cannot exercise the powers in section 15 because those powers envisage engagement only with the employer. As is clear from the statutory definition, a liquidator is not an employer for the purposes of this Act. Therefore, there is no possibility of using the section 15 mechanism as suggested.

While we don't have the power to ensure that Debenhams pay an enhanced redundancy package to its employees, an employer is obliged to pay the statutory redundancy entitlement as provided for in the Redundancy Payments Act 1967 and that is all that can be legally enforced against an employer.

As the company has been declared insolvent, the Department can provide a safety net for employees and the liquidator can submit claims for statutory redundancy and other wage related entitlements for payment from the Social Insurance Fund. We will ensure that the statutory redundancy entitlement which is laid out in legislation will be paid.

Wage Subsidy Scheme

1177. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if those childcare workers who are in receipt of one-parent family payment or working family payment, and who have also been receiving the wage subsidy scheme, will not be required to return the amount received during the Covid-19 closures; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6033/20]

1229. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if those childcare workers who are in receipt of one-parent family payment or working family payment, and who have also been receiving the wage subsidy scheme, will not be required to return amounts received during the Covid-19 closures. [6041/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1177 and 1229 together.

The Revenue Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is one of a number of measures to provide financial support to workers affected by the Covid-19 crisis. The scheme is operated by the Revenue Commissioners and enables eligible employees, whose employers' business activities have experienced significant negative disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic, to receive supports directly from their employer. It also ensures that employers retain employees during the pandemic in order to facilitate the business' operations in getting back to normal once the crisis eases. The subsidy scheme is implemented by employers through their payroll system, with employees receiving the subsidy payment along with any other payments made by the employer. It is a condition of this scheme that individuals cannot receive my Department's Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment at the same time as receiving payments under the Revenue TWSS or DCYA TWSCS.

The One Parent Family Parent, a means tested payment and Working Family Payment an income assessed payment take account of any earnings received by claimants. This includes any amounts received by way of Revenue TWSS payments.

Childcare workers who are in receipt of the one parent family payment or the working family payment will continue to receive these payments during their temporary lay-off as a result of the Covid-19 related closures provided they continue to meet the eligibility conditions for these schemes.

It is open to any customer who considers that their circumstances have changed to request a review of their claim. If this results in an increased rate of payment, this increase will be backdated accordingly. A reduction in a rate of payment is normally only applied from a current date, unless there is evidence that a customer knowingly misled the Department or failed to report a change in their circumstances.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Wage Subsidy Scheme

1178. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of workers who have been placed on the wage subsidy scheme but also informed or have had to apply for supplementary welfare payments due to the fact their earnings on the scheme are too low. [6155/20]

1243. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of persons who have applied for SWA since March 2020; and the number of those that are on the wage subsidy scheme. [6157/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1178 and 1243 together.

The supplementary welfare allowance (SWA) scheme is the safety net within the overall social welfare system in that it provides assistance to eligible people in the State whose means

are insufficient to meet their needs and those of their dependants.

Basic weekly SWA may be paid to customers awaiting the outcome of a claim or an appeal for a primary social welfare payment. In certain circumstances if a person is not eligible for other social welfare payments and their weekly income is below the SWA rate for their family size, a payment may be made to bring their income up to the appropriate SWA rate.

There are currently 15,100 customers in receipt of basic supplementary welfare allowance, this represents a decrease of 940 (6%) since the end of February 2020. Of these 15,100 cases, 3,400 have been registered since 1st March 2020.

The Temporary Work Subsidy Scheme is administered by Revenue. I am advised that data is not available on the number of persons on that scheme who have applied for SWA.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Domestic Violence

1179. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the person with lead responsibility for the co-ordination of the emergency Covid-19 response to domestic, sexual and gender based violence to put in place a short-term emergency rent supplement which would enable women and children in need of immediate relocation due to domestic violence to access safe housing for a period of three months or for the duration of the Covid-19 national emergency. [6315/20]

1180. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the plans in place to progress short-term emergency rent supplement which would enable women and children in need of immediate relocation due domestic violence to access safe housing for a period of three months or for the duration of the Covid-19 national emergency (details supplied). [6316/20]

1183. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the person or body that has lead responsibility for the co-ordination of the emergency Covid-19 response to domestic, sexual and gender based violence; and if a short-term emergency rent supplement which would enable women and children in need of immediate relocation as a result of domestic violence to access safe housing for a period of three months or the duration of Covid-19 emergency will be put in place.- [6679/20]

1184. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she can progress short-term emergency rent supplement which would enable women and children in need of immediate relocation as a result of domestic violence to access safe housing for a period of three months or for the duration of the Covid-19 emergency. [6680/20]

1185. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will put in place a short-term emergency rent supplement which would enable women and children in need of immediate relocation due to domestic violence to access safe housing for a period of three months and or the duration of the Covid-19 national emergency in view of her responsibility for the co-ordination of the emergency Covid response to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6733/20]

1186. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will reconsider her decision not to facilitate access to emergency rent supplement which would enable women and children in need of immediate relocation due to domestic vio-

lence to secure safe housing for a period of three months and or the duration of the Covid-19 national emergency; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6736/20]

1188. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will put in place a short-term emergency rent supplement which would enable women and children in need of immediate relocation due to domestic violence to access safe housing for a period of three months and or the duration of the Covid-19 national emergency in view of the fact she has lead responsibility for the co-ordination of the emergency Covid response to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. [6828/20]

1189. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if short-term emergency rent supplement will be progressed which would enable women and children in need of immediate relocation due to domestic violence to access safe housing for a period of three months and or the duration of the Covid-19 national emergency. [6829/20]

1190. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the person or body that has lead responsibility for the co-ordination of the emergency Covid response to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence; and if she has considered the provision of a short-term emergency rent supplement payment to enable women and children in need of immediate relocation due to domestic violence to access safe housing for a period of three months and or the duration of the Covid-19 national emergency. [6867/20]

1191. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection further to a statement by the Taoiseach in Dáil Éireann on 30 April 2020, if she will progress short-term emergency rent supplement to enable women and children in need of immediate relocation due to domestic violence access safe housing for a period of three months and or the duration of the Covid-19 national emergency. [6868/20]

1251. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the decision not to facilitate access to emergency rent supplement will be reconsidered which would enable women and children in need of immediate relocation due to domestic violence to secure safe housing for a period of three months or for the duration of Covid-19 national emergency. [6313/20]

1277. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will reconsider her decision not to facilitate access to emergency rent supplement which would enable women and children in need of immediate relocation as a result of domestic violence to secure safe housing for a period of three months or for the duration of the Covid-19 emergency. [6678/20]

1279. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will reconsider her decision not to facilitate access to emergency rent supplement which would enable men, women and children in need of immediate relocation due to domestic violence to secure safe housing for a period of three months and or the duration of the Covid-19 national emergency; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6727/20]

1281. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will reconsider her decision not to facilitate access to emergency rent supplement which would enable women and children in need of immediate relocation due to domestic violence to secure safe housing for a period of three months and or the duration of the Covid-19 national emergency; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6735/20]

1283. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will reconsider her decision not to facilitate access to the emergency rent supple-

ment which would enable women and children in need of immediate relocation due to domestic violence to secure safe housing for a period of three months and or the duration of the Covid-19 national emergency. [6827/20]

1286. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will reconsider her decision not to provide a Covid-19 domestic violence emergency rent supplement payment to enable women and children in need of immediate relocation due to domestic violence to secure safe housing for a period of three months and or the duration of the Covid-19 national emergency. [6861/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1179, 1180, 1183 to 1186, inclusive, 1188 to 1191, inclusive, 1251, 1277, 1279, 1281, 1283 and 1286 together.

Responsibility for the development and provision of services to support victims of domestic violence rests with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

The co-ordination of the services addressing the needs of these customers is managed by The Child and Family Agency, Tusla. Victims of domestic violence accommodation needs are met through this joined-up service delivery model provided by Tusla with the close involvement of the various housing authorities nationwide.

A housing authority can provide, on a humanitarian basis, short-term emergency housing to persons who are unable to return to their homes because of domestic violence without having to assess their eligibility for social housing support or include them on the authority's waiting list for housing supports.

Generally, where a victim is not seeking to return to the family home, a social housing assessment by the housing authority is the appropriate response. Assessments should be conducted in a timely manner to ensure that victims do not end up residing in emergency accommodation, including refuge facilities, for long periods of time. Once a customer has successfully completed a housing needs assessment, they can then apply for HAP.

As part of this response, Tusla funds and supports over 40 organisations providing support services to victims of domestic violence, including 20 refuges providing safe specialist emergency domestic violence accommodation. Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence Services, and in particular, Domestic Violence refuges have been identified as one of Tusla's three highest priority services in its crisis management responses to the period of Covid-19 public health measures. A range of supports have been put in place to assure continuity of essential services and there is ongoing systematic engagement between Tusla and service provider organisations around emerging needs.

Since the introduction of HAP, Rent Supplement continues to revert to original role of providing short-term support to those who have become temporarily unemployed and require income support to meet their tenancy cost whilst they seek alternative employment. Rent supplement, by virtue of its short-term nature and its targeted customer cohort, is not considered the principal solution in meeting the accommodation needs of those fleeing domestic or sexual violence, in particular where, following a Housing Needs Assessment, HAP is an available option.

There are no indications within my department that the rent supplement scheme is operating in a way that is preventing victims of domestic violence from getting the support they need, and Community Welfare Officers are using the full flexibility of the scheme to assist those in need during the current crisis.

Notwithstanding the above, my department does provide support to customers of domes-

tic violence. Under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme (SWA), Exceptional Needs Payments (ENP) / Urgent Needs Payments (UNP) are available to meet essential once-off cost for customers who are unable to meet these out of their own resources. Where a person's safety and well-being are at risk due to domestic violence, department officials operating SWA have discretionary powers to provide ENPs / UNPs to address the person's immediate needs. It is expected that whilst the Department is providing support, the person concerned can transition safely to the relevant agencies and supports that provide the tailored support that they require.

Officials in my Department continue to liaise with their colleagues in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs / Tusla, the Department of Justice and Equality and the Department of Housing Planning and Local Government to ensure that victims of domestic violence have appropriate supports including access to local authority sponsored housing via HAP.

Should the Deputy have a particular case in mind I would ask him/her to share the details with me and I will have it assessed without delay.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputies.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1181. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when persons whose pandemic unemployment payment claims were not paid will receive their backdated arrears; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6553/20]

1232. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to backdate the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment for persons who were unemployed as a result of the pandemic but did not receive their payment for a number of weeks; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6061/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1181 and 1232 together.

The emergency Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment has been introduced as a time-limited emergency measure so that payments can be made as quickly as possible to the large number of people who have become fully unemployed due to the pandemic.

During the month of March, my Department received and processed jobseeker claims equivalent in number to a three year claim-load. These applications were processed as quickly as possible, with almost 59,000 people paid in the first week of the scheme, 283,000 people paid in the following week, and over 507,000 people in the third week of the scheme. To date, approximately 4.33 million payments have issued to just over 670,000 individuals at a cost of over €1.5 Billion.

Currently, the Department is focused on processing and managing payments to ensure that they continue to be made to all who qualify for them. The work involved in doing this is complex, with people joining and leaving the scheme each week, along with management of overlaps between the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Revenue Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme.

The Department is aware that many people are due some arrears and that each person's case is unique. This means that each person's application may need to be individually reviewed .

I can assure the Deputy that all cases will be examined and where arrears arise they will be

processed and claimants will be notified.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1182. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason substitute teachers who are contracted for a minimum amount of hours but work more during the school term are not being included for Covid-19 unemployment payments to bring their pay in line with the €350 rate. [6568/20]

1245. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will extend the entitlement to the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment to persons who have an established historical work pattern of annual substitute teaching, exam aide, invigilator and or exam superintendent and are currently precluded from receiving the payment in view of the fact they were not in employment before 13 March 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6224/20]

1278. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if provision will be made for on-call workers and small business owners which are not PAYE workers but are on-call in essential services and may or may not have an income in a given week; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6720/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1182, 1245 and 1278 together.

The COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced in March 2020 as an emergency time-limited measure to meet the surge in unemployment which resulted from the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic. This emergency payment was introduced to support persons aged between 18 and up to 66 years old who have lost their employment due to the downturn in economic activity caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and where they are not being paid by their employer. In order to qualify for the payment a person must have been in employment on or after the 6th March. The conditions around the payment to self-employed people are that they must have experienced a collapse of income and be available to take up other full-time work if it was available to them in order to qualify.

People who do not meet these conditions may be eligible for support under the social insurance based jobseekers benefit schemes or the means tested jobseekers allowance scheme depending on their individual circumstances. People who are already in receipt of a jobseekers payment, which may include substitute teachers and exam invigilators, who were not employed on 6 March will continue to remain on this payment for as long as they are entitled to it.

Where a person is experiencing financial hardship they can apply for financial support Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme.

I trust that this clarifies the matter.

Questions Nos. 1183 to 1186, inclusive, answered with Question No. 1179.

Legislative Measures

1187. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Pro-

tection when a new Bill must be passed by the Houses of the Oireachtas to facilitate the continued payment of social welfare payments at their current rates of payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6804/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty):

Given the need to pay the Covid Pandemic Unemployment Payment as expeditiously as possible, Section 202 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 was used. This section allows for the provision of payments in urgent cases by way of Supplementary Welfare Allowance. The Covid-19 pandemic and resultant immediate economic impact is unprecedented and created an urgent requirement for the provision of income supports to over 600,000 people in a period of a little over a month.

There are a number of matters that may require placing the payment on a separate legislative footing including, for example, granting social insurance contributions to people who were temporarily laid off and are either in receipt of PUP or are being paid via the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme. These matters are currently being considered and legislative proposals will be brought to Government for approval.

The Government, by order, recently extended, until the 19th June, the provisions in the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020 to pay an enhanced rate of Illness Benefit to people diagnosed with Covid-19 or who are probable sources of infection from the virus.

Questions Nos. 1188 to 1191, inclusive, answered with Question No. 1179.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1192. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the Covid-19 payment will be prolonged beyond the current timeframe for artists and freelance technicians involved in the artistic industry (details supplied). [7003/20]

1221. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if there will be a change to the eligibility criteria to qualify for the pandemic unemployment payment in June 2020 in view of the announcement that the payment will be extended; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5939/20]

1222. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the extension to the pandemic unemployment payment will follow the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; if persons will no longer be eligible for the payment once their industry or place of employment is allowed to reopen as envisaged in the roadmap; if allowances will be made for persons who cannot return to work for medical or childcare reasons; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5940/20]

1223. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if students that were working part-time or on an ad hoc basis will continue to receive the pandemic unemployment payment once it is extended in June 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5941/20]

1224. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the length of time the pandemic unemployment payment will be extended for; the estimated expenditure on same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5942/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I

propose to take Questions Nos. 1192, 1221, 1222, 1223 and 1224 together.

This week, my Department issued COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment payments valued at over €200 million to 585,000 people. Projected expenditure for up to 12 weeks payment is in excess of €2.2 billion.

The Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, published by the Government on 1 May 2020 sets out a timetable for the phased reopening of society and the economy and envisages a series of steps which will lead to the resumption of various sectors of the economy. As this situation continues to evolve, decisions around the future of the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment will be taken by Government having regard to a range of factors including how the public health situation evolves and the effects of the re-opening of Phase 1 which are being carefully monitored.

I trust this clarifies the position at this time.

Departmental Contracts

1193. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if her Department has engaged the use of external consultants from 1 January 2020 to date; the details and costs of such engagements; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5529/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The procurement of consultancy services supports my Department in providing analysis that contributes to policy development.

Details of the consultancy service providers engaged by my Department since the start of this year are set out in the following table:

Name of Consultant	Details of Consultancy	Expenditure
Ruth Fitzgerald	Legal Advice to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection	€1,820
KPMG	Actuarial Services	€4,920
Crowleys DFK	1. Review of accounting processes for Appropriation and Social Insurance Fund Accounts 2. Review of Management Accounting processes	€12,730
Sonas Innovation	Data Administration	€94,648
Demarq	IT Administration	€4,920
Institute for Employment Studies and Social Finance	Procurement Consultancy Services in relation to Contracted Public Employment Services	€123,318 (includes expenditure in 2019)
Consult Hyperion	Data Privacy Impact Assessment	€44,433
Behaviour and Attitudes	Jobseeker and JobPath Customer Satisfaction Survey	€50,627
ESRI	Measurement and Analysis of Household Income and Living Conditions Research Programme	€35,276

Name of Consultant	Details of Consultancy	Expenditure
Total expenditure to date in 2020		€ 372,692

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1194. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason persons over 66 years of age laid off from work due to Covid-19 are not considered as worthy or not deemed eligible for the €350 payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5549/20]

1210. **Deputy Darragh O'Brien** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment for those aged 66 years of age and over who are excluded from receiving it will be extended; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5740/20]

1211. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the cut-off age of 66 for Covid-19 pandemic payments will be reconsidered (details supplied). [5778/20]

1248. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if persons over 66 years of age will be included in the newly extended pandemic unemployment payment; and if not, if their current payment will be brought up to €350. [6271/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1194, 1210, 1211 and 1248 together.

The COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced as a time-limited, emergency income support measure to meet the dramatic surge in unemployment as a consequence of the pandemic. This emergency payment supports people of working age from 18 and up to 66 years old who became unemployed on or after the 6th March as a result of the pandemic and are not being paid by their employer. This age range is consistent with other Social Protection income supports paid to working age persons. The primary State income support in respect of people who are aged 66 years or over is the State Pension – either the contributory State pension or the non-contributory pension, which is means tested.

A person in receipt of Contributory State Pension can retain all of their pension as well as their employment income and retain that pension if they lose employment, thus guaranteeing an income support. People in receipt of a reduced rate of non-contributory or means tested pension who are also in receipt of an employment income may have their pension payment increased if they lose that employment income or if it is reduced.

The weekly rate of the Covid-19 payment is €350 and is aligned with the jobseeker payment for a person with an adult dependent. The rate of payment for a State Contributory pensioner in a two person household with an adult dependent who is over 66 years is €470.80, significantly higher than the temporary Covid-19 payment. The maximum rate of payment for the non-contributory pension for a two person household is €393.60.

Recipients of State pension payments may, subject to satisfying eligibility conditions, have access to a range of supports not available to unemployed people aged under 66. These include living alone increase, household benefits, telephone support allowance, free travel and free TV licence. Additionally, as part of the Department's response to the COVID-19 emergency, the Fuel Allowance season has been extended by four weeks.

It should also be noted that there is no requirement for people aged over 66 to pay PRSI. PRSI contributions are payable by employees and self-employed persons between the ages of 16 years and pensionable age which is 66 years.

It is important to note that where a person, of any age, is experiencing financial hardship they can apply for financial support Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme.

I trust this clarifies my position.

Invalidity Pension Applications

1195. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason for the refusal of an invalidity allowance application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5578/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): I am advised that my Department has not received an application for Invalidity Pension from the person concerned.

However, the Department has received an application for Illness Benefit. I am advised that the person concerned does not qualify for Illness Benefit as he does not satisfy the PRSI contributions conditions.

One of the qualifying conditions for Illness Benefit is that a person must have 39 weeks of PRSI contributions paid or credited in the relevant tax year, of which 13 must be paid contributions at class A, E or H. Alternatively, a person may have 26 weeks of PRSI contributions paid in the relevant tax year, and 26 weeks of PRSI contributions paid in the tax year immediately before the relevant tax year with all such contributions at class A, E or H.

The person concerned was self employed and paying class S contributions in the relevant tax years, which is not a qualifying class of contribution for Illness Benefit. Therefore, he does not satisfy the contribution conditions for Illness Benefit.

A letter issued to the person concerned on the 7th May 2020 giving him the full details of this decision.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Jobseeker's Allowance Eligibility

1196. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will address a scenario (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5585/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Entitlement to disability allowance is based on satisfying medical, means and residency conditions.

In order to qualify for the scheme on medical grounds a person must be suffering from an injury, disease, congenital deformity or physical or mental illness or defect which has continued or may reasonably be expected to continue for a period of at least a year and as a result of the condition the person is substantially restricted in undertaking work which would otherwise be

suitable having regard to the person's age, experience and qualifications. The disability allowance scheme is structured to encourage recipients to avail of opportunities to engage in work where this is appropriate, either in self-employment or in insurable employment. Each application for disability allowance is assessed on its own merits.

Where a disability allowance claim is disallowed on the basis that a person is not medically incapable of work and that decision is subsequently appealed, jobseekers allowance is not payable during the time that the disallowance is under appeal. In order to qualify for a jobseeker's payment a person must satisfy the conditions for the scheme which include being capable of work, available for full-time work and genuinely seeking work.

Persons in this position who are waiting the outcome of their appeal and whose means are insufficient to meet their needs and the needs of their adult or child dependant(s) should apply for basic supplementary welfare allowance.

I trust this clarifies the matter of the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1197. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will backdate the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment for staff (details supplied) who were due to be paid through the temporary wage subsidy scheme at the end of April 2020 but were not in view of the fact the liquidators will not release the funds for wages. [5630/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Revenue Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is one of a number of measures to provide financial support to workers affected by the Covid-19 crisis. The scheme is operated by the Revenue Commissioners and enables eligible employees, whose employers' business activities have experienced significant negative disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic, to receive supports directly from their employer. It also ensures that employers retain employees during the pandemic in order to facilitate the business' operations in getting back to normal once the crisis eases. The subsidy scheme is implemented by employers through their payroll system, with employees receiving the subsidy payment along with any other payments made by the employer. The employer, however, is not entitled to the money in their own right and it cannot be used for any other purpose other than in accordance with the conditions of the scheme.

It is a condition of the scheme that individuals cannot receive my Department's Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment at the same time as receiving payments under the Revenue TWSS. However, it cannot be the case that employees are prevented from accessing financial support at this critical time by the actions or inactions of their employer. Accordingly, the individuals covered by the Deputy's question should apply for my Department's Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment if they have not already done so. Where arrears arise these will be processed in due course and individuals will be notified of the outcome. In line with all other cases where arrears entitlements may exist, my Department is committed to reviewing cases as quickly as possible.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Student Support Schemes

1198. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to put some supports in place for students in summer 2020 that under normal circumstances would take up employment or travel abroad for employment mainly in the hospitality sector but due to Covid-19 this will not be possible in view of the fact this summer income is vital to pay for college for the next year. [5632/20]

1255. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the point at which students from the class of 2020 will be eligible to apply for a jobseeker's allowance or payment should they wish to do so in view of the fact it is normally three months after exams but this is not an option in 2020 due to Covid-19 and the cancellation of exams. [6387/20]

1300. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to the number of Irish students completing masters and other post third-level education abroad who have returned home due to Covid-19 and find themselves without access to Covid-19 pandemic payments due to having been abroad prior to the 13 March 2020 cut-off or access to unemployment benefit due to their student status; if her attention has been further drawn to the financial duress they are experiencing as a result; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6985/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1198, 1255 and 1300 together.

The Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) Grant, payable by the Department of Education and Skills, represents the primary support for persons pursuing third level education. The matter of supports for students for the forthcoming academic year should be referred to the Minister for Education and Skills.

Under Social Welfare legislation students are disqualified from receiving jobseekers allowance while attending a course of study, including school or college holiday periods and for the 3 month period after completing the Leaving Certificate or leaving second level education. Following the cancellation of this year's Leaving Certificate Examination, these students will be eligible to apply for jobseekers Allowance from 30 August 2020, which is 3 months after their the end of term on 29th May.

The COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced in March 2020 as a time-limited emergency measure to meet the surge in unemployment which resulted from the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic. In order to be eligible for this payment a person must have been in employment or self-employment on or after 6th March 2020 and have become unemployed due to the downturn in economic activity caused by the COVID 19 pandemic. For this reason seasonal workers, including students, who had not taken up employment before 13 March 2020 are not eligible for the payment. It is not possible to construct a scheme based on claims of potential or prospective but unrealised employment, particularly in an environment where the economy was operating at full-employment with many unfilled vacancies prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Where a person is experiencing financial hardship they can apply for assistance through the means tested Supplementary Welfare Allowance. Information on the supports available under this scheme is available at www.gov.ie.

I trust that this clarifies the matter.

1199. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if her Department will change the Covid-19 contact number to a freephone 1800 number (details supplied). [5640/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Income Support Helpline referred to by the Deputy was established in March 2020 to provide customer information and support in relation to a range of income supports for people affected by the income impacts or health impacts of COVID-19. This includes the new Pandemic Unemployment Payment, Enhanced Illness Benefit for Covid19, other relevant income supports and advice including referrals to the Department's Community Welfare Services.

The relevant phone number for this service is a 1890 number - 1890 800 024. Since November 2019, as a result of changes introduced by COMREG, calls to any 1890 numbers now cost no more than calls to a landline number. Furthermore, all existing 1850, 1890 and 076 numbers will migrate to a single non geographic "0818" number in January 2022.

Calls to 1890 numbers are now included in mobile call bundles where customers have packages or subscriptions which include landline calls.

Customers can also contact their local Intreo centre with any income support or payment queries that they may have and the Department provides a detailed list of contact numbers for each scheme area and Intreo centre on our Department pages on Gov.ie.

Each Intreo centre also has contact email addresses that customers can use as an alternative way to contact the Department. Customers can make general information enquiries by contacting info@welfare.ie.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1200. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a reply will issue to the feedback by a person (details supplied) regarding those who have seriously reduced income as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic but are ineligible for support and the difficulties encountered trying to contact with her Department [5647/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic emergency. As stipulated in the scheme guidelines both employees and self-employed people can apply for the payment if they satisfy a number of qualifying conditions as set out below.

In order to qualify for the payment, the applicant must:

- be aged between 18 and 66 years old and
- be currently living in the Republic of Ireland and
- have lost their job due to the COVID-19 pandemic or
- have been temporarily laid off due to the COVID-19 pandemic and
- have worked in the Republic of Ireland or were a cross border frontier worker and
- not be in receipt of any employment income.

The payment also applies if the applicant is self-employed and their trading income has

ceased due to COVID-19.

In the case of the person concerned, her circumstances as she outlined them, are that she ceased her self-employment as a physiotherapist due to the Covid-19 crisis but has continued her insurable employment with her employer.

I am advised that as the person concerned is partially employed and deriving an income from her employer, she does not meet the criteria for receipt of the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP). However, it should be noted that under the SWA scheme, a single payment may be made to help meet essential, once-off, exceptional expenditure, which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet out of their weekly income. Should the person concerned consider that she may have an entitlement to a payment under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme she should contact my Department's Community Welfare Service at her local Intreo centre.

In relation to the person's difficulty making contact with the Department, the Department is operating the Income Support Helpline to assist our customers with information and advice about income supports available for people impacted by Covid-19.

The Covid-19 Income Support Helpline is open weekdays from 9am to 5pm and it can be contacted at 1890 800 024.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Fuel Allowance Payments

1201. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will consider extending the fuel allowance further in view of the extension of the lockdown. [5654/20]

1257. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to further extend the fuel allowance in view of the continuing Covid-19 crisis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6455/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1201 and 1257 together.

The fuel allowance is a payment of €24.50 per week for 28 weeks (a total of €686 for the fuel season) from October to April, to over 369,000 low income households, at an estimated cost of €261 million in 2020. The purpose of this payment is to assist these households with their energy costs. The allowance represents a contribution towards the energy costs of a household. It is not intended to meet those costs in full. Only one allowance is paid per household.

The fuel allowance is an important measure that assists pensioners and other welfare dependent householders to address income deficiency, especially during the winter when a household faces increased heating needs. The duration of the scheme is designed to coincide with the coldest periods of the year and it is for this reason the scheme runs from October to early-April.

On the 31st March, in order to support vulnerable households during the COVID-19 emergency, I was delighted to announce the extension of the fuel season by four weeks for existing eligible customers on a once-off basis. At an overall cost to the Exchequer of €36.61m, this extended the payment of €24.50 per week from Friday 10 April (when it was due to expire) until Friday 8 May 2020 and provided these vulnerable households with additional targeted financial

supports in a timely, efficient and time bound manner. This extension meant that the 2019/2020 Fuel Season ran to the latest end date of any season in the last 30 years.

While I fully understand that these are difficult and distressing times for many people, especially for the vulnerable and the elderly, any further economic measures, such as further extending the fuel allowance season, can only be considered while taking account of the overall budgetary context and the availability of financial resources. In the context of the COVID-19 emergency, the Government has already allocated c. €2.4 billion to a package of social protection measures.

Under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme a special heating supplement may be paid to assist people in certain circumstances. Exceptional needs payments may be made to help meet an essential, once-off cost, which an applicant is unable to meet from his / her own resources.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Departmental Expenditure

1202. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of expenditure (details supplied) by her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5657/20]

1203. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of expenditure (details supplied) by her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5665/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1202 and 1203 together.

The 2020 Revised Estimates Volume was published in December 2019 and the estimated overall expenditure for Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection for 2020 was €21,204.4 million (€21.2 billion).

The expenditure incurred for Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection scheme payments in April of each year 2012, 2016, 2019 and 2020 is detailed in the following table.

Year	April 2012	April 2016	April 2019	April 2020
Expenditure € million	1,597.3	1,664.7	1,641.5	3,144.2

The total expenditure incurred for Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection scheme payments in the years 2012, 2016 and 2019 is detailed in the following table.

Year	2012	2016	2019
Expenditure € mil- lion	20,734.6	19,787.7	20,755.4

I understand my colleague, the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform, will bring proposals to Government in the near future with regard to the Department's 2020 estimate and requirement for a Dáil vote.

Redundancy Payments

1204. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the steps to be taken to ensure workers at a company (details supplied) will be entitled to their full statutory redundancy payments. [5686/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Firstly, I would like to say that my thoughts are with all workers faced with the prospect of closure and job losses at this difficult time. With the exception of grocery outlets, the retail sector has been particularly affected by the measures we have had to take in response to the spread of Covid-19. Having come through a number of turbulent years and an examinership process, it must be difficult for Debenhams workers to now face redundancy. I applaud their efforts to ensure that they get the best outcome possible from the situation. I wish to assure the affected workers that my Department is available through its Intreo service to assist them in whatever way we can in terms of income supports and job-seeking over the coming weeks and months.

I want to assure everybody that the my Department is assisting the affected workers through its Intreo service to help them in whatever way we can in terms of income supports and job-seeking over the coming weeks and months. Indeed over the past number of weeks officials from my Department have engaged with both officials from Mandate and with the Human Resource management team in Debenhams to ensure that all workers have received their due entitlements from my Department.

My officials are also available to assist these workers in the job search efforts over the period ahead and with advice on further education and training options that will help them to find work within their sector or in other sectors where work opportunities will become available as the economy improves over the period ahead.

Furthermore, the redundancy and insolvency section of my Department has already engaged with the liquidators appointed to Debenhams and is continuing to work with them to ensure that all claims in respect of employees are dealt with expeditiously.

Since the announcement of the liquidation of Debenhams there have been calls on the Government to intervene in or halt the liquidation of the company and to ensure that employees of Debenhams receive enhanced redundancy payments. Employee representatives have also called for the 30 day mandatory consultation period to be extended.

The Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation has been clear that she, as the Minister responsible for company law legislation, has no statutory power to intervene in a court supervised liquidation. A company is permitted to initiate a voluntary winding up where it has complied with requirements of the Companies Act 2014.

I have been asked by the Mandate Trade Union to utilise my powers in accordance with Section 15 of the Protection of Employment Act 1977. In this regard, I sought urgent legal advice from the Attorney General in relation to those powers as they pertain to a court appointed liquidator. I received those advices yesterday and they are unequivocal.

I am advised that I, as Minister, cannot exercise the powers in section 15 because those powers envisage engagement only with the employer. As is clear from the statutory definition, a liquidator is not an employer for the purposes of this Act. Therefore, there is no possibility of using the section 15 mechanism as suggested.

While we don't have the power to ensure that Debenhams pay an enhanced redundancy package to its employees, an employer is obliged to pay the statutory redundancy entitlement as

provided for in the Redundancy Payments Act 1967 and that is all that can be legally enforced against an employer.

As the company has been declared insolvent, the Department can provide a safety net for employees and the liquidator can submit claims for statutory redundancy and other wage related entitlements for payment from the Social Insurance Fund. We will ensure that the statutory redundancy entitlement which is laid out in legislation will be paid.

Rent Supplement Scheme Data

1205. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of rent supplement claims made; the number of claims awarded from 18 April 2020 until 6 May 2020; the number of rent supplement recipients nationwide for the latest date available; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5687/20]

1237. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of applications made and claims awarded under the revised Covid-19 rent supplement scheme in counties Cavan and Monaghan. [6079/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1205 and 1237 together.

Rent supplement continues to play a key role in supporting families and individuals in private rented accommodation, with the scheme currently supporting approximately 19,200 recipients.

For the period 18th April – 6th May some 3,300 claims are currently either in payment (1,800 tenancies awarded) or under consideration/pending a decision (1,400 cases pending). For those cases awaiting a decision I am advised that this will generally be a result of necessary documentation still outstanding from the applicant or ensuring that the timing of the rent supplement payment matches the customer's rental commitments.

For the counties Monaghan and Cavan the total number of cases awarded since 13th March 2020 is 330 cases, Monaghan has had 210 cases awarded, and Cavan has had 130 cases receiving support.

Rent Supplement is means-tested payment, demand-led scheme and is available as a short-term income support to those in the private rented sector. In view of the difficulties created for many in the private rented sector who have lost significant employment income at this time, including persons who have been medically advised to self-isolate and also persons in casual or self-employment, my department is using the full flexibility of the scheme to provide the necessary support.

With the background of constrained supply within the overall rental sector, the Department continues to implement a targeted, flexible, case-by-case approach where rents exceed limits. This flexible and responsive approach is a key instrument in assisting families to keep their homes and has supported almost 14,900 rent supplement households through increased rental payments who were at imminent risk of homelessness or tenancy loss.

My Department continues to keep this policy position under ongoing review and will continue to provide flexibility in the administration of rent limits so that people can remain in their homes, in particular within the overall context of the Covid-19 emergency.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Appeals

1206. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when an appeals decision will be finalised for a person (details supplied) which was first submitted on 24 October 2019. [5688/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered in that office on 7 November 2019. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant papers and comments by or on behalf of the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. These papers were received in the Social Welfare Appeals Office on 6 January 2020 and the case was referred to an Appeals Officer on 30 March 2020. The appeal is currently being determined on a summary basis. A decision will issue over the coming days.

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

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1207. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the monthly costs for March and April 2020 with regard to all welfare supports as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown; and the estimated monthly costs for May, June, July and August 2020 with regard to all welfare supports as a result of the announced restrictions. [5692/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The cost of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment was €111 million in March 2020 and €770 million in April 2020.

The cost of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme was €22.8 million in March 2020 and €636.1m in April 2020.

A similar level of expenditure is expected on these schemes in May and for the earlier part of June. Expenditure beyond this will be dependent upon the impact of the phased return to work and retention and adaptation of these schemes.

The cost of enhanced COVID-19 Illness Benefit funded from the existing Illness Benefit scheme is estimated at €30 million over the period March to April 2020.

The fuel season was extended for 4 weeks up to 8th May 2020 in recognition of the COVID-19 emergency when people are being asked to cocoon and self-isolate at home. The cost of this measure is estimated at €34 million.

Departmental Correspondence

1208. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social

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Protection if her attention has been drawn to or if the issue of a letter was authorised from the office of her Department in Buncrana, County Donegal on 20 March 2020 to claimants encouraging them to change their payment from their post office to a bank account; if a letter has issued to retract this advice; if an apology will issue to post offices which are making efforts to ensure services can continue during the Covid-19 crisis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5694/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Following the Government decision to implement a scheme for people who lost their jobs from March 13 due to the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic, Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection officials embarked on the extensive task of putting procedures in place to process and issue payments to the significant numbers of customers claiming COVID-19 unemployment and illness related payments. In order to assist customers, all aspects that would facilitate the processing of claims and provisions of payments were considered, both within existing payment scenarios and taking into account the introduction of new social distancing requirements.

In response to the crisis, on 20 March a letter was issued to a small number of customers in Inishowen, Co. Donegal from the Community Welfare Service there, informing them of an option to redirect their payments from their Post Office to their Bank account, because of the risk inherent in queuing to collect their payment. While this option was proposed solely with the welfare of the customers in mind, I wish to emphasise that this correspondence was not in line with Departmental policy. Steps were therefore taken to rectify the situation as soon as it was brought to the attention of the manager concerned, on 26th March.

The relevant Post Masters were contacted immediately and provided with a verbal apology for any inconvenience caused, details regarding the erroneous issue of the letter; and an assurance of its immediate withdrawal. I am advised that the Post Masters were satisfied both with the explanation and the commitment to retract the advice that was provided to the customers in question.

Customers who had received the letter were also contacted on the 26 March. They were informed that the letter was issued in error, that there was no requirement to change their payment locations; and that they could therefore disregard the correspondence. I am advised that all of the customers contacted wished to keep their payments at the Post Offices as before.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1209. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a person (details supplied) can appeal the decision to refuse their application for the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5695/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): It is a condition for receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment that the person should have lost their job as a result of the Covid-19 crisis but have been in employment immediately prior to the 13th March 2020.

I am advised that my Department has no record of an application for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment being received from the customer but I can confirm that the customer made a claim for Jobseekers Allowance on 24th February which was subsequently awarded on 27th

February 2020.

Questions Nos. 1210 and 1211 answered with Question No. 1194.

Invalidity Pension

1212. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will address a matter regarding the case of a person (details supplied). [5791/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): This lady's invalidity pension has been reinstated with effect from Thursday 19 March 2020 at the maximum personal rate and she received her first payment in her bank account on Thursday 07 May 2020. She was notified of this decision on 29 April 2020.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Company Closures

1213. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she has received notification from a company (details supplied) of a proposal of collective redundancy as is required under section 12 of the Protection of Employment Act 1977; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5878/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Protection of Employment Act 1977 imposes a number of obligations on employers who are proposing collective redundancies, including an obligation under sections 9 and 10 to engage in an information and consultation process with employees' representatives and to provide certain information relating to the proposed redundancies. Section 11A of the Act provides that, where an employee believes the employer to be in breach of sections 9 or 10, they may pursue a complaint to the Workplace Relations Commission. It is also an offence under section 11 of the Act where an employer fails to comply with sections 9 or 10.

There is an obligation under section 12 which makes it mandatory on employers proposing a collective redundancy to notify the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection of the proposed collective redundancy.

An employer is prohibited from issuing the first notice of dismissal during the mandatory information and consultation period, the duration of which must be at least 30 days. The Act also provides that at least 30 days must pass from the date on which the Minister has been notified of the collective redundancy before the first dismissal can take effect.

For the avoidance of doubt, the minimum 30 day information and consultation process and the minimum 30 day period from the date of notification may run concurrently, but do not have to.

My Department received official notification of the proposed liquidation of Debenhams on 14 April 2020. Following a request from my officials to the liquidators for further information, I can confirm that the obligations to me as Minister under section 12 have now been fully complied with. It is my understanding that the redundancies are envisaged to occur in or around 18 May 2020.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

Question No. 1214 answered with Question No. 1176.

Jobseeker's Allowance

1215. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if those on jobseeker's payments are being afforded leeway in terms of applying for work in view of employment restrictions; and if cuts to jobseeker's payments made since the start of the restrictions due to the applicants inability to apply for work will be reversed. [5884/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): All customers making a claim for, or in receipt of a jobseekers payment must satisfy the deciding officer that they fulfil the conditions for receipt of a payment under that scheme. The genuinely seeking work and availability requirements remain for all jobseekers.

Jobseekers should continue to make efforts to secure employment with a view to taking up such employment when the current restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic are eased. A jobseeker may continue to apply for employment by email, by phone or through an employment website such as *www.JobsIreland.ie* as they would have done before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Jobseeker claims are dealt with on an individual basis and the deciding officer takes into account the circumstances of the customer and the prevailing economic situation while having regard to the conditions for the scheme. Decisions made on each jobseeker claim are based on the information available to the deciding officer at that time. If a customer is not satisfied with the decision a review may be requested or an appeal may be lodged within 21 days.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Medical Aids and Appliances

1216. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason a person (details supplied) is not entitled to a grant towards a hearing aids update; and if this will be reviewed. [5902/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I am advised that my Department has undertaken a review of the social insurance record of the person concerned and can confirm that she is entitled to the hearing aid grant under the Department's PRSI scheme. An approval notification will issue to the person shortly.

I hope this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

Carer's Benefit Eligibility

1217. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will examine the circumstances referenced in correspondence from a person (details supplied); if carer's benefit can be extended in this case; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5904/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Government recognises the crucial role that family carers play in Irish society and is fully com-

mitted to their support through a range of supports and services. The main income supports provided by my Department include Carer's Benefit, Carer's Allowance, Domiciliary Care Allowance, and the Carer's Support Grant. Spending on these payments in 2020 is expected to exceed €1.3 billion.

Carer's Benefit is a payment made to insured people who leave the workforce to care for someone in need of full-time care and attention. Carer's Benefit is payable for a maximum period of 104 weeks for each person being cared for. It can be taken in one block or in separate periods as long as the combined total does not exceed 104 weeks.

Extending the number of weeks Carer's Benefit is paid from its current 104 weeks would incur additional expenditure. It should be noted that not all those claiming Carer's Benefit remain in payment for the full 104 weeks. My Department examined this matter in 2017 and found that the average duration on Carer's Benefit was 74.2 weeks between 2010 and 2016. Therefore, the current 104 week payment duration represents a reasonable length of time to support a carer's temporary absence from work.

Where care is provided beyond the period of entitlement to Carer's Benefit, the means tested Carer's Allowance is available for those who are in need of income support.

The means test for Carer's Allowance is one of the most generous in the social protection system. Currently €332.50 of gross weekly income is disregarded in the calculation of means for a single person; the equivalent for someone who is married, in a civil partnership or cohabiting is €665 of combined gross weekly income. A Carer may engage in employment outside the home for up to 18.5 hours per week.

The conditions attached to payments of Carer's Allowance are consistent with the overall conditions that apply to social assistance payments generally. This system of social assistance supports provides payments based on an income need with the means test playing the critical role in determining whether or not an income need arises as a consequence of a particular contingency – be that illness, disability, unemployment or caring. Carer's Allowance acts as an income support for those who cannot earn an income in the open labour market due to their caring responsibilities. The continued application of the means test not only ensures that the recipient has a verifiable income need but that resources are targeted to those with greatest need.

Based on the number of carers identified as part of Census 2016, it is estimated that a universal carer's payment could cost up to an additional €1.2 billion per annum.

In assessing claims for means tested social welfare schemes, account is taken of the income and the value of capital, including shares, of the claimant and his or her spouse/partner.

The general rule for assessment of pension funds or annuities is that money invested in a pension fund is not assessable for means purposes if it is not accessible to the claimant. However, this must specifically be a pension fund, and not a general savings account being used by the claimant as savings for their retirement. For PRSA pensions, so long as the pension remains inaccessible to the claimant, it is not assessable as means.

The value of any cash otherwise available from a pension fund is assessed on the basis of the capital valuation of that fund and any regular pension payments received are treated as income for means purposes.

I can assure the Deputy that I am very aware of the key role carers play in society and I will continue to keep the range of supports available to carers under review. Any improvements or additions to these supports must be considered in a budgetary context and in the light of available financial resources.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Payments Administration

1218. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will examine the issue of welfare payments being made every two weeks (details supplied). [5906/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): My Department introduced a series of measures to maintain social welfare payments while assisting with social distancing measures designed to combat the spread of the Coronavirus.

Fortnightly payments were introduced to minimise the need for people to attend and queue in banks or post offices to collect payments, so helping people restrict their movements to essential activities only. These were introduced on a 'payment in advance' basis so people did not have to wait two weeks for a payment.

It is not possible to introduce differentiated payment cycles for each individual or for different cohorts of individuals and on balance the Department believes that it is better at this time to retain the two-weekly payment cycle, particularly for schemes that are not exclusively paid by EFT.

I would emphasise that where a person encounters financial difficulty they can contact their local community welfare officer for assistance or can seek advice and support from MABS.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1219. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a pandemic unemployment payment will be backdated for a person (details supplied). [5916/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): According to the records of my Department, I am advised that the person concerned is currently in receipt of a Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment (PUP).

The current focus is on ensuring that PUP payments are made and continue to be made to all who qualify for them. My Department is aware that many people are due some arrears and that each person's case is unique. This means that each person's individual application may need to be reviewed to accurately calculate any arrears due.

Given the current extraordinary circumstances it will be some time before my Department will be able to fully resolve the arrears issue. Should the person concerned be experiencing financial difficulties he can contact the Community Welfare Service (CWS) in the Tallaght Intreo Centre to seek financial assistance under the supplementary welfare allowance (SWA) scheme.

Under SWA, the Department can make a single exceptional needs payment (ENP) to help meet essential, once-off expenditure, which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet out of their weekly income.

The Community Welfare Service can be contacted by phone at 01 4629400 or by email at CWSTallaght@welfare.ie.

Updates will also be provided via my Departments website www.gov.ie/deasp.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1220. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the expenditure to date on the pandemic unemployment payment; the number in receipt of the payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5938/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Expenditure on Pandemic Unemployment Payment is €1.5 billion to date. This includes 585,000 people who will received the payment during week commencing Monday, 18th May 2020 costing €204.6 million.

Questions Nos. 1221 to 1224, inclusive, answered with Question No. 1192.

Revised Estimates Publication

1225. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when approval by Dáil Éireann for a new estimate for Vote 37 will be required; the process for approving same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5943/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): As the Revised Estimates Volume (REV) for 2020 has not yet been voted upon, spending thus far in 2020 is operating under the ‘four-fifths’ rule which applies to voted expenditure under the Central Fund (Permanent Provisions) Act, 1965. Under this rule, Departments can spend an amount up to 80% of that included for the relevant Department in the previous year’s Appropriation Act. This legislative provision ensures that Departments can continue to spend in the period before the Estimates are voted by the Dáil.

I understand my colleague, the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform, will bring proposals to Government in the near future with regard to the Department’s estimate and requirement for a Dáil vote.

Illness Benefit Eligibility

1226. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if changes are envisaged in June 2020 to illness benefit for Covid-19 related absences in terms of rate or eligibility criteria; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5944/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The purpose of the enhanced Illness Benefit payment in respect of COVID-19 is to encourage people to not go to work due to financial constraint when they should be in isolation. The rate of payment is higher than the normal maximum personal rate for a limited period. The measures were designed to ensure that where a registered medical practitioner or a HSE medical officer of health diagnoses a person with COVID-19 or identifies him or her as a probable source of infection of COVID-19, that the person can comply with medical advice to isolate.

It is important that employees and the self-employed comply with public health advice to self-isolate where appropriate, while having their income protected to the greatest extent possible. This is essential to limit and slow down the spread of the virus, to keep the number of

people affected to a minimum, and to reduce a peak of cases which would cause extreme pressure on the health system.

The rate of the enhanced Illness Benefit payment for Covid-19 is €350 per week, with additional payments possible in respect of a qualified adult and qualified children. The payment is made for a defined maximum period for each of the two situations listed. The current rate and eligibility criteria will continue to be available until at least 19th June.

The Department is engaged in ongoing consideration of specific and appropriate responses to this situation as it evolves. Any future decision will have to be considered in the context of public health and fiscal policy.

Departmental Staff

1227. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if her Department will implement initiatives to allow employees to carry forward annual leave that they have accrued during the Covid-19 crisis; if she has examined the possibility of such an initiative; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5979/20]

1233. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if consideration is being given to enable workers who have not taken some or all of their statutory annual leave entitlement due to Covid-19 to be able to carry weeks of accrued but untaken annual leave over into the next two leave years as is allowed for in the UK; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6068/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1227 and 1233 together.

The Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 sets out the key parameters for the taking of annual leave and payment for same. The terms and conditions of individual employment contracts may provide additional specifics within those parameters such as stipulations in relation to the taking of minimum blocks of leave and the timing of leave.

Section 20 of the Act of 1997 in essence provides that the employer determines the timing of an employee’s annual leave, taking into consideration work and personal requirements. It also provides that the employer should consult the employee or the relevant trade union at least one month in advance.

Workers and employers, most of whom have now been engaging for several weeks in reaching reasonable arrangements and accommodations in the current extraordinary circumstances, are encouraged to continue doing so in a constructive manner. Complaints in relation to employers attempting to impose more restrictive terms than are provided by statute or in the terms and conditions of the individual employment contract should be made to the Workplace Relations Commission.

It is understood that the strong legislative provisions already in place allow sufficient flexibility for employees and employers to navigate current events in the context of annual leave and, therefore, no legislative amendments are proposed at this juncture.

My Department continuously monitors existing employment rights legislation to ensure that it continues to be relevant and fit for purpose and is updated to reflect international developments at European Union, Court of Justice and International Labour Organisation level.

Where any new legislation is proposed, my Department engages in extensive consultation with all relevant stakeholders, to ensure that an appropriate balance is struck between the rights of workers and the interests of business.

I hope this clarifies matters for the Deputies.

Redundancy Payments

1228. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a person who has been laid off as a result of the appointment of a liquidator to a business can take up alternative employment with another employer without it impacting on the person's redundancy entitlements; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6004/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): In situations where an employee has been given notice of redundancy by their employer, an employee may wish to leave their employment earlier than the date of redundancy notified to them, for example to take up alternative employment. In such cases Section 10 of the Redundancy Payments Act 1967, as amended, provides that an employee can request in writing, within the obligatory period of notice, to leave their employment on an earlier date.

An employer has discretion as to whether to grant such a request or not. If the employer agrees, they must consent in writing to the employee's request to leave early and the entitlement to redundancy is unaffected. The redundancy lump sum will be calculated up to the actual employment termination date.

It is important to note that leaving during the notice period without the employer's written agreement may affect a person's entitlement to a redundancy payment. Disputes in this regard can be referred to the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC). The WRC is mandated to secure compliance with employment rights legislation. If employees have concerns or complaints regarding their employment rights the Customer Service Section of the WRC provides information in relation to employment, equality and industrial relations rights and obligations, and how to obtain redress where appropriate.

Question No. 1229 answered with Question No. 1177.

Domiciliary Care Allowance Appeals

1230. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a decision has been made on a domiciliary care allowance appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6059/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered in that office on 7 October 2019. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant papers and comments by or on behalf of the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. These papers were received in the Social Welfare Appeals Office on 24 January 2020 and the case was referred to an Appeals Officer on 25 February 2020. The Appeals Officer had decided to hold an oral hearing in this case on 31 March 2020. However, due to the current Covid-19 restrictions, the oral hearing was cancelled. The appeal is currently being determined on a summary basis. A decision will issue over the coming days.

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

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Carer's Allowance Payments

1231. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if consideration will be given to a position by which claimants in receipt of a primary social welfare benefit and who are also eligible for carer's allowance can be paid the carer's allowance at a full rate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6060/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I can assure the Deputy that I am very aware of the key role carers play in society and I will continue to keep the range of supports available to carers under review. Combined spending on all payments to carers in 2020 provided by my Department is expected to exceed €1.3 billion.

The social welfare system generally operates under the principle of a single payment per person, whereby only one weekly social welfare payment is payable to an individual. Persons qualifying for more than one social welfare payment receive the higher payment for which they are eligible.

Notwithstanding that principle, those in receipt of certain social welfare payments (other than Carer's Allowance or Benefit) who are providing full-time care can retain their main payment and receive another payment, depending on their means, the maximum of which is equivalent to a half-rate Carer's Allowance. These arrangements apply to almost all weekly social welfare payments and to people in receipt of qualified adult allowances; however, recipients of Jobseeker's Allowance or Benefit are not eligible given the job seeking nature of these payments.

Any proposed changes to these supports can only be considered in a budgetary context and in the light of available financial resources.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 1232 answered with Question No. 1181.

Question No. 1233 answered with Question No. 1227.

Disability Allowance Appeals

1234. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a decision has been made on a disability allowance appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6070/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered in that office on 18 March 2020. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant papers and comments by or on behalf of the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. These papers were received in the Social Welfare Appeals Office on 7 April 2020. On 22 April 2020

the case was referred to an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on documentary evidence presented or, if required, hold an oral hearing.

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

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Invalidity Pension Appeals

1235. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a decision has been made on an invalidity pension appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6072/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered in that office on 11 March 2020. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant Departmental papers and comments by the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought. When these papers have been received from the Department, the case in question will be referred to an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented or, if required, hold an oral appeal hearing.

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

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Invalidity Pension Appeals

1236. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a decision has been made on an invalidity pension appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6073/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered in that office on 11 March 2020. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant Departmental papers and comments by the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought. When these papers have been received from the Department, the case in question will be referred to an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented or, if required, hold an oral appeal hearing.

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

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 1237 answered with Question No. 1205.

Mortgage Interest Supplement Scheme

1238. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the reintroduction of the mortgage interest supplement scheme will be considered particularly in view of the large number of persons unemployed and in need of mortgage support; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6138/20]

1240. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will consider the reintroduction of the mortgage interest supplement scheme particularly in view of the large number of persons unemployed and in need of mortgage support; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6140/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1238 and 1240 together.

The original purpose of the mortgage interest supplement scheme (MIS) was to provide short-term support to eligible people who were unable to meet their mortgage interest repayments in respect of a house which was their sole place of residence, due to temporary unemployment or loss of earnings.

The mortgage interest supplement scheme was discontinued for new entrants from 1 January 2014, on the basis that:

1. The on-going payment of Mortgage Interest Supplement did not address the long term housing challenges for people in serious mortgage arrears; and,
2. The Central Bank's Code of Conduct for Mortgage Arrears (CCMA) provides for an appropriate framework for customers, with the responsibility of forbearance for a customer's Mortgage difficulties resting with the mortgage service provider.

Any change to this decision would need to be considered in the overall budgetary and policy context. The most appropriate way in which customers experiencing mortgage difficulties can be supported remains through on-going engagement with their lender to explore a sustainable and appropriate response from their lending institution.

Under the CCMA (2013), measures and policies are in place to support customers in financial difficulty with their mortgage commitments. The CCMA is issued by the Central Bank under Section 117 of the Central Bank Act 1989 and ensures that the responsibility of forbearance remains with the mortgage service provider.

The CCMA provides support for those that are in arrears, pre-arrears or those who fall under scope of the Mortgage Arrears Resolution Process (MARP). Under the CCMA, lending institutions are encouraging customers to contact them at the earliest opportunity regarding their concerns and any particular circumstances which may impact on the customer's financial well-being.

A cross-industry co-ordination Group, chaired by Banking and Payments Federation Ireland (BPFI), is looking at all coronavirus related issues that may impact customers. This includes both the overall economic impact of the coronavirus situation and its direct effect on customers. A number of emergency measures have also been announced by individual lending bodies including increased overdraft facilities and increased credit card and cash withdrawal limits.

The Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS), under the aegis of the Citizens Information Board, also continues to provide assistance to people, in particular those on low incomes or living on social welfare payments, who are over-indebted and need help and advice

with debt problems. As part of its free services, MABS provides help and advice to those in mortgage arrears.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1239. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her views on correspondence (details supplied) in respect of the additional and complex requirements that have been added to the responsibility of carers since the Covid-19 restrictions; the additional resources being put in place for persons in a similar situation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6139/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Government acknowledges the crucial role that family carers play and is fully committed to supporting carers in that role. This commitment is recognised in both the Programme for Government and the National Carers' Strategy.

The main income supports to carers provided by my Department are Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit and the Carer's Support Grant. As of end of March 2020 there were 86,286 recipients of Carer's Allowance. The projected expenditure on Carer's Allowance in 2020 is approximately €919 million. Combined spending on all DEASP payments to carers in 2020 is expected to exceed €1.3 billion.

The means test for Carer's Allowance is one of the most generous in the social protection system. Currently €332.50 of gross weekly income is disregarded in the calculation of means for a single person; the equivalent for someone who is married, in a civil partnership or cohabiting is €665 of combined gross weekly income.

The conditions attached to payments of Carer's Allowance are consistent with the overall conditions that apply to social assistance payments generally. This system of social assistance supports provides payments based on an income need with the means test playing the critical role in determining whether or not an income need arises as a consequence of a particular contingency – be that illness, disability, unemployment or caring.

The continued application of the means test not only ensures that the recipient has a verifiable income need but that resources are targeted to those with greatest need. Based on the number of carers identified as part of Census 2016, it is estimated that a universal carer's payment could cost up to an additional €1.2 billion per annum.

Other available supports to family carers that are not means-tested include:-

- **Carer's Support Grant:** The Carer's Support Grant is paid automatically to people in receipt of Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit or Domiciliary Care Allowance. Other people who are not in receipt of a social welfare payment but who are providing full time care and attention are also eligible and can apply for a grant. The Carer's Support Grant is an annual payment of €1,700 a year for each care recipient paid in a single lump sum with no requirement to satisfy a means test.

- **Domiciliary Care Allowance:** Domiciliary Care Allowance is a monthly payment for a child aged under 16 with a severe disability, who requires ongoing care and attention, substantially over and above the care and attention usually required by a child of the same age. It is not means tested. The Domiciliary Care Allowance rate is €309.50 per month. There is no restric-

tion on the number of children for whom a person may claim Domiciliary Care Allowance. (In other words, a person caring for more than one child who qualifies for Domiciliary Care Allowance may claim the monthly allowance for each child.)

My Department also provides the Exceptional Needs Payment which is a single payment to help meet essential, once-off, exceptional expenditure, which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet out of their weekly income.

I can assure the Deputy that I am very aware of the key role carers play in society and I will continue to keep the range of supports available to carers under review. However, any improvements or additions to these supports can only be considered in a budgetary context and in the light of available financial resources.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 1240 answered with Question No. 1238.

Working Family Payment

1241. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason a person (details supplied) in County Donegal was refused the working family payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6146/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Working Family Payment (WFP) is an income tested, in-work payment which provides additional financial support to employees on low earnings with children. In order to qualify for WFP, an applicant or the applicant and a spouse, partner or cohabitant must be engaged in full-time remunerative employment as an employee for not less than 38 hours per fortnight. This primary employment condition must be satisfied on an ongoing basis.

I am advised that the person concerned had a WFP claim which was due for reapplication on 15 April 2020. Their re-application was disallowed on 06 April 2020 on the grounds that they did not satisfy the above employment (hours worked) condition. This decision was based on information provided by the persons employer on the reapplication form, pay-slips provided by the person concerned and the Department's real-time (current) employment records.

Following a request from the person concerned, a review of the above decision was completed on 08 May 2020. This review was based on the updated information provided by the person concerned. I am advised that the Department's position did not change and the decision of 06 April 2020 was upheld following this review.

The person concerned was informed on 08 May 2020 of the review outcome and of their right of appeal to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Officer.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Disability Support Services

1242. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her views on a project by a person (details supplied) with regard to outcomes in respect of the deaf community and a proposal on the measures to help create a more integrated society. [6151/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I have noted the correspondence referred to in the question.

For the Deputy's information, I have set out below the supports available from my Department to support people with disabilities, including deaf people, to achieve their employment goals.

In addition to providing income supports, my department provides a wide range of employment-related supports for both jobseekers with disabilities and employers seeking to employ a jobseeker with a disability (or retain an existing employee who has or acquires a disability). These supports for jobseekers with disabilities have been designed to enable persons with a disability to achieve their employment ambitions by focusing on the individual person's ability and capacity, rather than on the disability. The pre-employment and in-employment supports available include:

Employment Supports for Jobseekers with a Disability:

DEASP Intreo Service

Jobseekers (including jobseekers with disabilities) who seek support from their local Intreo Centre, will have a meeting arranged with a case officer with a view to agreeing a suitable personal progression plan in order to access the full range of employment supports available with a view to them achieving their employment ambitions.

Local Employment Service

The Department contracts for the provision of the Local Employment Service, which provides a local gateway, or access point, to the full range of services and facilities that are available to help jobseekers, including jobseekers with disabilities, to enter or return to employment.

EmployAbility Service.

The Department has contracts for the provision of the EmployAbility Service with 24 companies. This is a specialist employment service designed to improve employment outcomes for jobseekers with a disability. The service includes the provision of dedicated job coach support as well as both pre-employment and in employment support and assistance.

AHEAD (Support For Graduates With Disabilities)

The Department contracts AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability) to deliver the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) and 'Get Ahead' programmes. These programmes provide supports for graduates with disabilities seeking to enter the workforce.

Ability

The 'Ability' programme is co-funded by the Irish Exchequer and the EU's ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning Operational Programme (PEIL, 2014 – 20). Under this programme funding has been provided, through Pobal, for 27 organisations to support young people (aged 15-29) with disabilities in their transition into further education or employment.

Employment Supports for Employers:

Wage Subsidy Scheme

The Wage Subsidy Scheme is targeted at private sector employers and is aimed at encourag-

ing the employment of people with disabilities through the provision of financial incentives (a wage subsidy). The subsidy is delivered in three strands:

-Strand I subsidy is a general subsidy for any productivity shortfall in excess of 20% for a person with a disability, in comparison to a colleague without a disability. An employee must work for a minimum of 21 hours per week up to a maximum of 39 subsidised hours per week. The rate of subsidy is €5.30 per hour and the amount of the subsidy is based on the number of hours worked.

- Strand II subsidy is payable when an employer employs three or more people with a disability who are supported by a WSS Strand I payment. Strand II is intended to cover the additional supervisory, management and other work based costs relating to these employees. This top-up payment is a percentage of the Strand I subsidy and is based on the overall number of employees with a disability employed under Strand I. It ranges from an additional 10% of wage subsidy for 3 to 6 employees with a disability to a maximum of 50% of wage subsidy for 23+ employees with a disability.

- Strand III subsidy enables employers who employ 30 or more workers with a disability on the Wage Subsidy Scheme to be eligible for a grant of up to €30,000 per year towards the expense of employing an Employment Assistance Officer to support these employees.

Reasonable Accommodation Fund

The Reasonable Accommodation Fund (RAF) assists both jobseekers with disabilities and employers to enable a persons with disabilities to enter/re-enter or sustain employment by providing a range of grants. In summary, the fund is comprised of the following four grants:

Employee Retention Grant

The purpose of the Employee Retention Grant Scheme is to assist employers to retain employees who acquire a disability by providing funding to:

- Identify accommodation and / or training to enable the employee to remain in his/her current position; or
- Re-train the employee so that s/he can take up another position within the company.

Workplace Equipment/Adaptation Grant

Where a person with a disability has been offered employment or is in employment, and requires a more accessible workplace or adapted equipment to do the job, s/he or the employer may apply for a grant towards the costs of adapting premises or equipment.

Job Interview Interpreter Grant

A jobseeker who is deaf, hard of hearing or has speech impairment and is attending job interviews, may apply for funding to have a sign language interpreter or other interpreter to attend the interview with him/her. Funding can also be provided to cover the costs of an interpreter during an induction period when starting work.

Personal Reader Grant

If a person is blind or visually impaired and needs assistance with job-related reading, s/he may be entitled to a grant to allow him/her to employ a Personal Reader.

Disability Awareness Training Support Scheme

In addition to the RAF, the Disability Awareness Training Support Scheme (DASS) provides funding (a grant) for the provision of Disability Awareness Training for a company's staff. The purpose of the training is to deliver clear and accurate information about disability and to address questions or concerns that employers and employees may have about working with and supporting a colleague with disabilities.

Finally, it is worth also noting that the Department of Justice & Equality (DJE) is the lead department with regards to Ireland's Comprehensive Employment Strategy for people with disabilities. DJE recently published a revised (phase two) action plan (in December 2019) in consultation with government departments/agencies and stakeholders to deliver on the objectives of the CES in the coming years. The revised action plan is available on the DJE website at

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/CES_Action_Plan_2019_to_2021.pdf/Files/CES_Action_Plan_2019_to_2021.pdf

Question No. 1243 answered with Question No. 1178.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1244. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the State could pay maintenance payments that are not being made on the basis that the State could recoup these costs after the Covid-19 crisis. [6196/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Issues relating to maintenance are a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Justice and Equality, who has responsibility for the Family Law Acts, which govern maintenance requirements.

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection has no legal basis to pay maintenance in lieu of the other parent's responsibilities.

If a person who was in receipt of maintenance that they are entitled to, following a court order, and has stopped receiving it, they should contact the Courts Service. If this person is also in receipt of One-Parent Family Payment, they should also contact my Department to have their One-Parent Family Payment reassessed to reflect the change in circumstances.

Where a One Parent Family recipient contacts the local Intreo Centre to state that they are no longer receiving maintenance due to the Liable Relative losing their job, they will need to provide a declaration to that effect. The result of this declaration is that their means will be reassessed on that basis, and a review marked for 12 weeks later.

The One Parent Family recipient will be contacted after the 12 week period to see if there are any changes in their circumstances, and to establish if there has been any change in the situation. The means will be reassessed if necessary following this review.

Given that the family courts are not hearing maintenance cases during the pandemic, this situation will be carefully monitored on an ongoing basis, to ensure that there are no difficulties or unnecessary hardship experienced by affected parents.

Question No. 1245 answered with Question No. 1182.

Widow's Pension Eligibility

1246. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a widow's pension will be awarded to a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6265/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The person concerned is currently in receipt of state pension contributory at a reduced rate. I am advised that date my Department does not appear to have received an application for widow's/widower's & surviving civil partner's contributory pension from the person concerned. Accordingly we have issued an application form to the person concerned, which should be completed and returned as soon as possible so that their entitlement can be determined. There is a maximum backdating period of six months.

Widow's/widower's & surviving civil partner's contributory pension is based on social insurance contributions. It is not means tested and is therefore not affected by any occupational pension(s) that the person may be in receipt of.

We hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1247. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if seasonal workers will be included in the newly extended pandemic unemployment payment in view of the fact they have been hugely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and disadvantaged by their inability to qualify for the payment. [6270/20]

1254. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the position regarding seasonal workers in the tourism industry who were not in employment in the beginning of March 2020 as the tourism season was just about to commence at that stage and would have been on jobseeker's allowance; if they are precluded from the pandemic unemployment payment for the entire period in view of the fact they would have been normally due to take up work in March; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6345/20]

1272. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her views on a matter (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6621/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1247, 1254 and 1272 together.

The COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced in March 2020 as a time-limited emergency measure to meet the surge in unemployment which resulted from the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic. The conditions for receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment are that a person must of working age between 18 and up to 66 years old, have lost their employment on or after 6 March and the income associated with that employment due to the impact of the pandemic. If this is not the case the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment is not payable.

It would be impossible to construct a scheme based on claims of potential or prospective but unrealised seasonal employment, particularly in an environment where the economy was operating at full-employment with many unfilled vacancies prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. People who are currently receiving a jobseeker's payment, including seasonal workers, who have been out of work for some time will continue to remain on this payment for the period they are entitled to it.

Where a student engages in seasonal work but was not in employment on 6 March they would not be eligible to receive the COVID-19 pandemic unemployment payment. The Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) Grant, payable by the Department of Education and Skills, represents the primary support for persons pursuing third level education. The matter of supports for students for the forthcoming academic year should be referred to the Minister for Education and Skills.

Where a person is experiencing financial hardship they can apply for financial support under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Question No. 1248 answered with Question No. 1194.

Living Wage

1249. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the position on the living wage in view of the considerable departure from the previous position in the recent Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Government negotiation document; the details on this new position; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6303/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): As the Deputy will understand, I am not in a position to comment on any potential changes to specific policy issues which may be implemented by a new Government, until that Government is formed, and a finalised Programme for Government has been agreed.

Carer's Support Grant

1250. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of the carer's support grant; and if the grant will remain place for 2020 and going forward. [6312/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Government acknowledges the crucial role that family carers play and is fully committed to supporting carers in that role. This commitment is recognised in both the Programme for Government and the National Carers' Strategy.

The main income supports to carers provided by my Department are Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit and the Carer's Support Grant. Combined spending on all DEASP payments to carers in 2020 is expected to exceed €1.3 billion.

The Carer's Support Grant is a non-means tested annual payment for carers who look after certain people in need of full-time care and attention. Carers in receipt of Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit or Domiciliary Care Allowance on the 1st Thursday in June are paid the Grant automatically on that date. A carer, not in receipt of one of these payments, may still qualify for the 'standalone' Carer's Support Grant.

It is a primary condition for receipt of the Carer's Support Grant (as well as for Carer's Benefit and Carer's Allowance) that the carer must be providing full-time care and attention to a person who is so incapacitated that they require such full-time care and attention because of a specified illness or disability. The period of full-time care and attention must last for at least six months. This period of care must include the first Thursday in June. The Grant is fully exempt

from income tax, PRSI and USC.

The current rate of Carer's Support Grant is €1,700 and will issue to customers with an entitlement to payment on the first Thursday in June 2020. This payment will automatically issue to people in receipt of the payments outlined above. Officials in my Department have also contacted customers who were awarded the 'standalone' Grant in 2019, advising them that the Grant would be paid to them automatically for 2020 and have requested that they contact the Department if they no longer meet the conditions for receipt of payment.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 1251 answered with Question No. 1179.

Jobseeker's Allowance

1252. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason for the delay in the processing of a jobseeker's application for a person (details supplied) in Dublin 20. [6317/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): As the Deputy will be aware, my Department has experienced unprecedented demand for income supports including the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment and Jobseeker's payments. Delays can occur in some cases but please be assured staff are working on processing all applications as quickly as possible.

The person concerned submitted an application for jobseeker's allowance from 21/4/2020. This application has been awarded and the first payment will be available in the nominated bank account of the person concerned on 19/5/2020. Payment covers the period 21/4/2020 to 26/5/2020 and includes all arrears due to the person concerned.

Notification of claim award has been sent to the person concerned via his MyWelfare account.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Working Family Payment Eligibility

1253. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will review the requirement to work for 38 hours or more per fortnight to be eligible for the working family payment (details supplied). [6343/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Working Family Payment is an in-work support which provides an income top-up for employees on low earnings with children. Working Family Payment is designed to prevent in-work poverty for low paid workers with child dependents and to offer a financial incentive to take-up employment. The estimated annual expenditure on Working Family Payment in 2019 is approximately €397.2 million. As of February 2020 the support is paid to approximately 52,469 families in respect of some 117,940 children.

It important that Working Family Payment does not inadvertently subsidise unsustainably low earnings or encourage employers to offer minimal hours of employment. The longer term goal of Working Family Payment, as an incentive to take up and remain in work, could be com-

promised if the nature of the work taken up is not sustainable.

There are a number of supports currently available from the Department in cases where an individual may not be eligible for Working Family Payment include the Short Term Work Support and Jobseekers Allowance, which allows an individual to work up to three days without losing their benefit. The Department regularly updates information regarding the supports available during Covid-19 and details of these can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/department-of-employment-affairs-and-social-protection/>.

Reducing the “hours worked” requirement for Working Family Payment would also have significant expenditure implications which are difficult to quantify and would have to be considered in an overall budgetary context.

Question No. 1254 answered with Question No. 1247.

Question No. 1255 answered with Question No. 1198.

Widow’s Pension

1256. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if provision will be made for widows on becoming eligible for a widow’s pension to retain the State pension paid to their late spouse but paid at a quarter of the rate in view of the fact that they have the same ongoing cost of living expenses; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6433/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): There are a number of basic principles which underpin the Irish social insurance system. Firstly, there is the contributory principle. Under this principle there is a direct link between the PRSI contributions that a person has paid and entitlement to a varying range of benefits and pensions. Where a person has sufficient PRSI contributions, then benefits and pensions may be paid, where a particular contingency arises and without a means test.

Secondly, there is the solidarity principle. Under this principle the benefits and pensions that are paid are not directly related to the amount of PRSI contributions paid by insured persons. PRSI contribution income is instead redistributed to support contributors who are more vulnerable.

To qualify for a Widow’s, Widower’s or Surviving Civil Partner’s (Contributory) Pension, either the person claiming or their late spouse or civil partner must have a certain number of PRSI contributions and not be in a cohabiting relationship. All the PRSI requirements must be met on one person’s record - one may not combine the contributions of either spouses or civil partners. All PRSI contributions must have been made before the death of the spouse or civil partner.

Virtually all PRSI contributions count towards this pension, including contributions paid by public servants and the self-employed. Once in payment, the pension remains payable while the person remains widowed or a surviving civil partner. The pension is payable regardless of other income.

Primary social welfare legislation provides that PRSI paid by the person and their employers only provides coverage for one payment at such times. In the case of PRSI funded pensions, a person cannot be in receipt of both a State Pension (Contributory) and a Widow’s, Widower’s or Surviving Civil Partner’s (Contributory) Pension. It should be noted, however, that the

maximum personal rate of a Widow's, Widower's or Surviving Civil Partner's (Contributory) Pension is significantly higher for those aged 66 or over than it is for a widow or widower of working age, as it is aligned with the maximum personal rate for the State Pension (Contributory).

To change the underlying principle of entitlement, and allow people claim multiple payments would involve significant additional expenditure which could prove unsustainable in the long-term, and would have to be considered in the overall policy and budgetary contexts.

There are a number of additional supports in the social welfare system which further benefit widows:

- A person who loses their spouse or civil partner may be entitled to the Living Alone Allowance in addition to the Widow's Pension.

- People in receipt a Widow's Pension may also be eligible for the Household Benefits Package. In addition, a widow aged between 60 and 65 years, whose late spouse/civil partner received the Household Benefits Package from this Department, may qualify for that package if they otherwise satisfy all other conditions and receive a relevant qualifying payment.

- A Widow's Pension recipient may also qualify to receive Fuel Allowance, subject to the conditions of the scheme, including a means test.

- A Widow's Pension recipient who qualifies for both the Living Alone Allowance and the Fuel Allowance will automatically qualify for the Telephone Support Allowance. This payment aims to help those living alone with the cost of communications and/or home alert security systems.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 1257 answered with Question No. 1201.

Social Welfare Benefits Applications

1258. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if an application by a person (details supplied) will be granted. [6466/20]

1259. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if an application for community welfare assistance by a person (details supplied) will be considered. [6468/20]

1260. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if applications for community welfare assistance by a person (details supplied) will be reviewed. [6470/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1258 to 1260, inclusive, together.

The main purpose of the supplementary welfare allowance scheme (SWA) is to provide immediate and flexible assistance for those in need who do not qualify for payment under other State schemes.

Under SWA, my Department can make a single Exceptional Needs Payment (ENP) to help meet essential, once-off expenditure, which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet

out of their weekly income. There is no automatic entitlement to these payments which are payable at the discretion of the officers administering the scheme, taking into account the requirements of the legislation and all the relevant circumstances of the case, in order to ensure that the payments target those most in need of assistance.

The person concerned applied for assistance with the cost of repairing her heating system and a cheque for €760 was issued, payable to the repair company. This cheque has been returned uncashed to the Department.

I am advised that the person concerned also sought assistance with another bill. The Department encourages customers to engage with the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) to establish a manageable and sustainable path out of debt. Where this has occurred, my Department may make a contribution towards reducing the debt.

I understand that person concerned has been advised to contact MABS for assistance with managing these bills and she was also advised that she may subsequently apply for assistance under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme and her eligibility will be assessed in the usual manner.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1261. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a person (details supplied) is entitled to the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment. [6477/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is an emergency payment of €350 per week introduced by the Government for a 12 week period and intended to compensate those workers whose employers cannot retain them on their payroll. The payment is also being made to people who are self-employed but whose trade has temporarily ceased.

One of the eligibility criteria for the payment is that a person must have been in employment on or after 6 March 2020 and lost their employment due to COVID-19.

The person in question made an initial application for PUP on 1 April 2020 indicating their last day worked as 25 February 2020. The person in question submitted two further applications containing information contrary to the original application. Confirmation from the employer was requested by the Department. I am advised that the employer has stated in his letter that the person's last day of employment was 25 February 2020. The person in question, therefore, does not meet the eligibility criteria for PUP.

I understand that the person in question is currently in receipt of a One Parent Family Payment from my Department.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1262. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the pandemic unemployment payment can be extended indefinitely under section

202 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005; if there are limits placed on the powers granted under this section; if she can spend as much money as deemed appropriate under this section; if primary legislation will be needed for the pandemic unemployment payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6490/20]

1276. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if section 202 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 has been used previously for a payment such as the pandemic unemployment payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6669/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1262 and 1276 together.

Given the need to pay the Covid Pandemic Unemployment Payment as expeditiously as possible, Section 202 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 was used. This section allows for the provision of payments in urgent cases by way of Supplementary Welfare Allowance.

The Covid-19 pandemic and resultant immediate economic impact is unprecedented and created an urgent requirement for the provision of income supports to over 600,000 people in a period of a little over a month. Therefore, it was appropriate to use section 202 as the basis for the payment. As there has never been a situation comparable to the Covid-19 'lock-down' of businesses, an urgent need to provide payments of this type to so many people in such a short period of time has never arisen before. This is the first time that the section has been used for this purpose.

There are a number of matters that may require placing the payment on a separate legislative footing including, for example, granting social insurance contributions to people who were temporarily laid off and are either in receipt of PUP or are being paid via the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme. These matters are currently being considered and legislative proposals will be brought to Government for approval.

Pandemic Unemployment Payments are funded through the Department's vote. As the Revised Estimates Volume for 2020 has not yet been voted upon, spending thus far in 2020 is operating under the 'four-fifths' rule which applies to voted expenditure under the Central Fund (Permanent Provisions) Act, 1965.

I understand my colleague, the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform, will bring proposals to Government in the near future with regard to the Department's estimate and requirement for a Dáil vote.

Invalidity Pension Applications

1263. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if an application for invalidity pension by a person (details supplied) will be expedited; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6491/20]

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 for no other reason and who satisfy the pay related social insurance (PRSI) contribution conditions.

The Department received a claim for IP for the gentleman concerned on 02 July 2019. He

was refused IP on the grounds that the medical conditions for the scheme were not satisfied. He was notified on 03 October 2019 of this decision, the reasons for it and of his right of review or appeal.

He requested a review of this decision and submitted further medical evidence in support of his request. Following a review of all the information available it was decided that there was no change to the original decision. He was notified on 05 March 2020 of the outcome of the review.

He subsequently lodged an appeal with the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO) and submitted further medical evidence in support of his appeal. Following a review by a deciding officer of this medical evidence in conjunction with all information available, it was decided that there was no change to the original decision. A submission was prepared by the department and was forwarded to the SWAO on 13 May 2020 for determination by an appeals officer.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1264. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the level of flexibility regarding the Covid-19 payment of €350; if small business owners and or sole traders in receipt of the payment can still avail of some sort of financial assistance as they return to work or attempt to gain work on a phase by phase basis in harmony with the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6503/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, published by the Government on 1 May 2020 sets out a timetable for the phased reopening of society and the economy and envisages a series of steps which will lead to the resumption of various sectors of the economy. Decisions around the future of the supports in place will continue to be monitored having regard to a range of factors including how the public health situation evolves and the effects of the re-opening of Phase 1.

The Government recognises that the COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges for businesses. My colleague, the Minister for the Department of Business Enterprise and Innovation has introduced a range of supports and guidance for businesses available on the Department's website at www.dbei.gov.ie.

The COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced in March 2020 as a time-limited emergency measure to meet the surge in unemployment which resulted from the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic. The conditions around the payment to self-employed people, including sole traders and business owners, are that they must have experienced a collapse of income and be available to take up other full-time work if it was available to them in order to qualify. If a self-employed person does not meet this criteria and is continuing to operate their business at a reduced level they may be eligible to apply for support under the means tested jobseeker's allowance.

I trust that this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Wage Subsidy Scheme

20 May 2020

1265. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she is satisfied that the terms of the wage subsidy scheme are such that in circumstances in which a PRSI credit has been applied for the duration of the scheme by an employer in respect of an employee that the social protection or pension contributions of that employee are not diminished particularly when retirement of the employee will take place; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6572/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, which is operated by Revenue, provides the payment of support to employers in respect of eligible employees where the employer's business has experienced significant disruption due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As set out in the legislation underpinning the scheme, employers are required to record PRSI at Class J9 for each employee in respect of whom a subsidy is being claimed. This is required for Revenue administration purposes and to allow for the reconciliation of subsidy payments made.

In the exceptional circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is important that employees do not have their social insurance records interrupted or otherwise adversely impacted for future social welfare entitlements including for contributory State pension qualification purposes due to their participation in the scheme.

My Department is currently developing legislative proposals for consideration by the Government in the near future.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Jobseeker's Allowance Payments

1266. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of jobseeker's payments being made while applicants are unable to apply in person for employment due to Covid-19 restrictions. [6580/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): All customers making a claim for, or in receipt of, a jobseekers payment must satisfy the deciding officer that they fulfil the conditions for receipt of a payment under that scheme. The genuinely seeking work and availability requirements remain for all jobseekers and the deciding officer is obliged to take into account the individual circumstances of the customer and the prevailing economic situation while having regard to the conditions of the scheme.

A person may make an application for a jobseekers payment on-line through www.mywelfare.ie where possible or by post if they wish. An application may also be made in the normal way to their local Intreo Centre or Social Welfare Branch Office.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Rates

1267. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to develop a programme to index social welfare rates to the minimum essential standard of living; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6581/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) is an assessment, developed by the Vincentian

Partnership for Social Justice, of the minimum needed to live and partake in the social and economic norms of everyday life for various household types.

The model produces a minimum income standard which is dependent on whether the household is, among other factors:

- (i) in a rural or urban location;
- (ii) composed of a single working age person, a couple, a single- or two-parent family, a single pensioner or a pensioner couple; and
- (iii) living in private rented accommodation, social housing or is an owner-occupier.

It should be noted that the MESL for welfare households assumes that households are eligible for a medical card and, as such, health and insurance costs are reduced accordingly. While the model assumes that pensioners have the Free Travel pass and the Household Benefits package, it does not assume this for working age people. Certain working age recipients of welfare payments do qualify for Free Travel – recipients of Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension, and Carer's Allowance, for example.

Bringing weekly working age social welfare rates in line with the MESL entails increasing the maximum personal rate to €245 and the Qualified Child Increase to €48.50 for children under 12 and €82.40 for children aged 12 and over. There would be no proportionate increase in the current rate for Qualified Adults in order to meet the MESL.

The estimated full year cost of implementing these measures is €2.4 billion. This costing is subject to change in the context of emerging trends and associated revisions of the estimated numbers of recipients.

Any change to the current process of setting social welfare rates would require Government approval and would have to be considered in the overall policy and budgetary context. This would include taking account of stakeholder views, as well as considerations of cost, work incentives, poverty alleviation, policy alignments and the administration of any proposed system.

Pension Provisions

1268. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the measures in place during Covid-19 to make it safer and easier for pensioners to receive payment; if she will consider the feedback from a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6582/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): My Department introduced a series of measures to maintain social welfare payments while assisting with social distancing measures designed to combat the spread of the Coronavirus.

Fortnightly payments were introduced to minimise the need for people to attend and queue in banks or post offices to collect payments, so helping people restrict their movements to essential activities only. These were introduced on a 'payment in advance' basis so people did not have to wait two weeks for a payment.

People who would normally collect their social welfare payment in cash at a post office have the option to request to have their payment made directly into a bank account should they wish to do so.

In addition, the period of time in which cash payments have to be collected at post offices has been considerably extended. If any person has received an expired payments letter, they should contact my Department so that their social welfare payment can be reinstated.

Finally, the rules around nominating agents to collect social welfare payments at post office have also been changed to allow for more frequent agent collections.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1269. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason a person (details supplied) has been refused the pandemic unemployment payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6589/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is an emergency payment of €350 per week introduced by the Government for a 12 week period and intended to compensate those workers whose employers cannot retain them on their payroll. The payment is also being made to people who are self-employed but whose trade has temporarily ceased.

It is not a payment to compensate for a partial loss of income by people who continue to work.

Like many other sectors, the farming community has experienced difficulties since the outbreak of the pandemic but the majority are continuing to farm and find a market for their produce. Arrangements are also in place to enable marts to operate.

In common with all self-employed workers, farmers can apply for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment but whether or not they receive it is dependent on them satisfying the conditions for receipt of payment.

The person in question made an application for COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment on 24 April, 2020. I am advised that as the person in question is continuing to farm and is not available to take up full-time work he is not eligible for the payment.

If the person in question is experiencing financial difficulties there are supports available from my Department in the form of Farm Assist or Supplementary Welfare Allowance.

I trust that this clarified the matter for the Deputy.

Jobseeker's Payments

1270. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of persons on jobseeker's benefit and jobseeker's allowance, respectively, that have been placed on a penalty rate since 13 March 2020; the number of persons that have been placed on a penalty rate for failing to attend meetings requested by her Department or failing to participate in an appropriate employment support scheme, work experience or training, respectively; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6609/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): As part of the Department's response to the Covid-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic and in particular the social distancing measures introduced by Government all activation appointments were suspended from early March 2020. The application of activation sanctions was temporarily

suspended.

There have been no Jobseeker's Benefit or Jobseeker's Allowance customers placed on an activation penalty rate since 13 March 2020 to date.

Social Welfare Code

1271. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the occasions on which section 202 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 has been utilised since it came into effect; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6620/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The supplementary welfare allowance (SWA) scheme offers a safety net within the overall social welfare system by providing assistance to those whose means are insufficient to meet their own needs and those of their dependants. The main purpose of the scheme is to provide immediate and flexible assistance to those in need who do not qualify for payment under other State schemes. There are several payments within the scheme, including urgent needs payments (UNPs).

Under Section 202 of the Social Welfare (Consolidation) Act 2005, an urgent needs payment can be made to persons who have an urgent need which they cannot meet from their own resources or where an alternative is not available at that time. UNPs can be paid to people who may not normally qualify for SWA. The Department issued over 1,700 urgent needs payments in 2019.

Given the urgent need to ensure eligible claimants were paid as quickly as possible, Section 202 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 has been relied upon for the payment of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

There are a number of matters that may require placing the payment on a separate legislative footing including, for example, granting social insurance contributions to people who were temporarily laid off and are either in receipt of PUP or are being paid via the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme. These matters are currently being considered and any necessary legislative proposals will be brought to Government for approval.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

1272. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her views on a matter (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6621/20]

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1273. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if assistance is available for employers endeavouring to keep their business afloat but that cannot afford the redundancy costs they are facing; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6622/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Entitlement to a redundancy payment is defined under the Redundancy Payments Act. It is the employer's responsibility to pay statutory redundancy payments to eligible employees.

In situations where an employer is unable to pay these entitlements due to financial difficulties or insolvency an application for payment under the Redundancy Payments Scheme may be submitted to the Department. The Department will make the statutory redundancy payment to eligible employees on behalf of the employer.

The Redundancy Payments Scheme is funded from the Social Insurance Fund (SIF). When such a redundancy payment is made from the fund, a debt is raised against the employer. The Department will engage with employers to establish their financial situation on a case by case basis and seeks to recover the debt on a mutually agreed basis, including repayments by instalment, where appropriate. This ensures that the scheme takes into account both an employer's ability to pay redundancy payments and that the Social Insurance Fund can be reimbursed in due course.

The Department of Business, Enterprise & Innovation has agreed a major expansion of business supports that have been developed for companies dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Employers can contact a dedicated Business Support Call Centre, available at 01 631 2002 and at infobusinesssupport@dbei.gov.ie. This provides information on the government supports available to businesses and enterprises affected by COVID-19, which are also listed and available on that Department's website www.dbei.gov.ie or via Gov.ie. This is in addition to the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme which supports employers from the private sector experiencing significant economic disruption.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1274. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the maternity benefit, pandemic unemployment payment or the temporary Covid-19 wage subsidy scheme will continue for employees in the private sector in order to provide employment protection in cases in which the employee is unable to access childcare to return to work when their sector reopens under the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6657/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, published by the Government on 1 May 2020 sets out a timetable for the phased reopening of society and the economy and envisages a series of steps which will lead to the resumption of various sectors of the economy. As this situation continues to evolve, decisions around the future of the emergency income measures will be taken having regard to a range of factors including how the public health situation evolves which is being carefully monitored.

People on maternity leave should remain on that leave until such time as they are due to return to work. A person can also avail of up to 16 weeks unpaid maternity leave which can be added to the end of the 26 week period of paid leave.

Many employers can, and do, agree compassionate leave arrangements with staff who need to take short periods of time off to care for another person or new baby. These include arrangements to enable employees to work remotely from home, to alter shift patterns around their partners work, to work-up time taken, to rearrange parental leave or to bring forward annual leave entitlements from future work periods.

Where parents have to continue to work and is it not possible to make appropriate compassionate leave arrangements, employees can call on some statutory entitlements which provide for income support including paid Force Majeure Leave, Parents Leave together with Parents

Benefit, for each parent where a baby was born after 1st November 2019 or unpaid Parental Leave.

I trust this clarifies the position at this time.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1275. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the employment protections being considered or in place to ensure security and protection of employment in the public and private sectors if employees cannot return to work due to no childcare being available; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6658/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): ‘The Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business’ sets out how the Covid-19 restrictions will gradually be lifted. As different parts of the economy open at different times, the fact that schools and creches have not yet re-opened may cause some obstacles for workers with childcare responsibilities. Some workers will be able to manage this with their partner and extended family, whereas others will not.

The Government has requested employers to be as flexible as possible in allowing staff time off to look after their children or other members of their families. Just some of the flexible options to be considered include -

- Offering paid compassionate leave,
- Allowing employees to work from home,
- Altering shifts, so that employees can coordinate caring between themselves and partners, or another person,
- Allowing employees to rearrange holidays,
- Allowing employees to take paid time off that can be worked back at a later time etc.

I would encourage any employees affected by the lack of childcare to engage with their employer in the first instance with a view to exploring all options available to enable them to return to work. I would encourage all employers to be as flexible and supportive as possible in the circumstances with a view to maintaining good employment relationships over the long term.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

Question No. 1276 answered with Question No. 1262.

Question No. 1277 answered with Question No. 1179.

Question No. 1278 answered with Question No. 1182.

Question No. 1279 answered with Question No. 1179.

Maternity Benefit

1280. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the benefits a person (details supplied) who is due to go on maternity leave in July 2020 and is at present on jobseeker’s allowance can apply for; and if she will make a statement on

the matter. [6732/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is an emergency payment of €350 per week introduced by the Government for a 12 week period and intended to compensate those workers whose employers cannot retain them on their payroll. The payment is also being made to people who are self-employed but whose trade has temporarily ceased.

One of the eligibility requirements for the payment is that a person must have been in employment on or after 6 March 2020 and lost their employment due to COVID-19.

I am advised that the person in question made an application for PUP on 31 March 2020 indicating her last day of employment was 1 January 2020. She is therefore ineligible for the payment.

I am further advised that the person in question is not eligible for Maternity Benefit as she does not satisfy the PRSI contributions requirement.

The person in question is currently in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance from my Department. In the absence of any complications of pregnancy or other illness, a pregnant woman who is not entitled to Maternity Benefit satisfies the condition of being capable of work for the purpose of Jobseeker's Allowance.

Where a person of any age is experiencing financial hardship they can apply for financial support through the means tested Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme from my department.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 1281 answered with Question No. 1179.

Maternity Benefit

1282. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the benefits available to mothers who are due to go on maternity leave and will not be entitled to maternity benefit due to the fact they work seasonally and will not be in insurable employment up to the day of their maternity leave due to Covid-19 and who are not entitled to the Covid-19 payment as a result of not being working on the relevant dates; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6773/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Maternity benefit is a payment made for 26 weeks to employed and self-employed pregnant women who satisfy certain pay related social insurance (PRSI) contribution conditions. In order to qualify for maternity benefit, a person must be in employment immediately before the first day of her maternity leave. The last day of insurable employment must be within 16 weeks of the end of the week in which her baby is due. If a woman satisfies these conditions and ceases employment within this 16 week timeframe, payment of maternity benefit can commence from the following day.

Where an individual is not in employment within the 16 week timeframe or has insufficient social insurance contributions to qualify for maternity benefit, they may be eligible for another social welfare payment provided they meet the relevant conditions, including jobseekers.

The conditions of the emergency COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment are that a

person must have lost their employment and income following the onset of the Covid19 pandemic. It would be impossible to construct a scheme based on claims of potential or prospective but unrealised employment, particularly in an environment where the economy was operating at full-employment with many unfilled vacancies prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is open to any person experiencing financial hardship to apply for assistance through the means tested Supplementary Welfare Allowance. Information on the various income supports is available at www.gov.ie.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 1283 answered with Question No. 1179.

Community Employment Schemes

1284. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if consideration has been given to allowing those who have reached the State pension age to stay involved in a community employment scheme beyond that age if they so wish; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6844/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): 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 CE Sponsoring Bodies that receive state funding from the Department to cover the cost of CE participant, supervisor and assistant supervisor remuneration.

Funding for CE employees is available until the person reaches the state pension age (as provided for by Section 7 of the Social Welfare and Pensions Act 2011). They may remain on CE until the working day before they reach the state pension age as follows:

- 66 for those born before 1 January 1955;
- 67 for those born on or after 1 January 1955; and
- 68 for those born on or after 1 January 1961

CE participants, supervisors and assistant supervisors may apply for a State Pension on retirement from CE. If they wish to continue to work after they reach pension age they may apply for positions that are not state funded or, they can apply to the scheme to work in a voluntary capacity.

As CE is a working age activation scheme, employees who continue to be funded through CE must be of working age. As you will appreciate, if my Department continued to fund CE participants, supervisors or assistant supervisors after they have reached state pension age, it would significantly impact on the opportunities for those people who are still of working age and would undermine the reputation of CE as an active labour market programme.

Illness Benefit Data

1285. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social

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Protection when the technical issues will be resolved to enable manual updating of contributions for illness benefit claims. [6860/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I am advised that the technical issue which prevented the manual updating of contributions for Illness Benefit claims has been resolved.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 1286 answered with Question No. 1179.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1287. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the extent to which a review has taken place regarding the decision not to award a Covid-19 related payment in the case of a person (details supplied) in view of the fact the person's absences from work arise directly from the Covid-19 crisis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6874/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) was introduced by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. To be eligible for the Covid-19 PUP a person must have been in employment or self-employment on or after 6/3/2020 and must have lost their employment or self-employment due to a downturn in economic activity related to Covid-19.

The records of my Department reflect that the person concerned is currently in receipt of an Illness Benefit payment since 13/4/2020. This payment has been certified up to 18/5/2020.

On cessation of his Illness Benefit payment and subject to the eligibility criteria for Covid-19 PUP, it is open to the person concerned to submit a Covid-19 PUP application online at www.mywelfare.ie if he feels he satisfies the eligibility criteria for payment of this income support.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Personal Public Service Numbers

1288. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when a PPS number will issue in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6875/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I am advised that the Department has no record of an application for a Personal Public Services Number (PPSN) in respect of this individual.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Personal Public Service Numbers

1289. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social

Protection when a PPS number will issue in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6876/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I am advised that the Department has no record of an application for a Personal Public Services Number (PPSN) in respect of this individual.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Invalidity Pension

1290. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of the payment of an invalidity pension in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6877/20]

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 for no other reason and who satisfy the pay related social insurance (PRSI) contribution conditions.

The department received a claim for IP for the lady concerned on 12 March 2020. The claim was refused on the grounds that the medical conditions for the scheme were not satisfied. She was notified on 27 March 2020 of this decision, the reasons for it and of her right of review and appeal. To date, she has not requested a review or an appeal of the disallowance decision.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Illness Benefit Payments

1291. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of the payment of illness benefit in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6880/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): An Illness Benefit claim from the person concerned was received by the Department on the 10th March 2020.

In order to qualify for illness benefit a person must be under the pensionable age of 66. The person concerned does not qualify for illness benefit as they are over the state pension age and as such they are not entitled to claim Illness Benefit.

I am advised that a letter issued to the person concerned on the 14th May 2020 giving him the full details of this decision.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1292. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of the pandemic unemployment payment scheme; the number of persons availing of the scheme; the cost for each of the weeks ending 15 March to 3 May 2020, in tabu-

lar form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6888/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment is an emergency payment introduced by the Government for a 12 week period for employees and self-employed people who have lost all their employment due to the COVID-19 public health emergency. The original rate of payment was €203 per week which was increased to €350 per week.

It is expected that 585,000 will receive the payment during week commencing 18th May 2020 costing €204.6 million.

The number of persons availing of the scheme and the weekly expenditure since its introduction are outlined in the following table:

Payment on	Recipients	Expenditure €m
24th March 2020	58,739	11.9
31st March 2020	283,038	99.1
7th April 2020	497,626	174.2
14th April 2020	528,343	184.9
21st April 2020	583,317	204.2
28th April 2020	590,976	206.8
5th May 2020	602,106	210.7
11 May 2020	589,638	206.5

Jobseeker's Payments

1293. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will consider deferring jobseeker's benefit means tests for those transitioning from jobseeker's allowance until a later date in view of the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent difficulties posed in carrying out means test assessments and the difficulties social protection customers face in seeking employment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6889/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The main income supports, excluding the emergency time-limited Pandemic Unemployment Payment, offered by my Department for people who have lost employment are the social insurance contribution based jobseeker's benefit and means tested jobseeker's allowance schemes.

Jobseekers benefit is paid for 9 months (234 days) for people with 260 or more PRSI contributions paid and is paid for 6 months (156 days) for people with fewer than 260 PRSI contributions paid. Where a person exhausts their claim for jobseekers benefit or they do not meet the contribution requirement they may apply for means tested jobseekers allowance.

Social assistance schemes such as jobseeker's allowance are means-tested to ensure that resources are directed to those with the most financial need. A maximum rate is payable where a person has no or limited means, and tapering applies to the rate payable to those with modest or more substantial means, as there is an expectation that those with resources can at least partly contribute towards supporting themselves.

Removing the means test for jobseeker's allowance would involve fundamentally changing the nature of the scheme. It would change from being a targeted income support for those most in need, to a universal support. The key eligibility criteria remaining would be that the claimant

be unemployed and genuinely seeking work. Consequently, to ensure the most effective use of resources, it is considered more appropriate that the jobseeker's allowance means test remains.

Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance Scheme Eligibility

1294. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if workers who have been in receipt of the PUP will be entitled to the back to school clothing and footwear allowance. [6892/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The back to school clothing and footwear allowance (BSCFA) scheme provides a once-off payment to eligible families to assist with the costs of clothing and footwear when children start or return to school each autumn. The Government has provided €53.98m for the scheme in 2020 which operates from June to September.

The allowance is payable in respect of eligible children between the ages of 4 and 17 in respect of whom a qualified child allowance is being paid and eligible children between the ages of 18 and 22 who are in full-time second level education and in respect of whom a qualified child allowance is being paid.

I am currently considering proposals to make the necessary arrangements so as to ensure that those in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment with qualified children, and who need to avail of the back to school clothing and footwear allowance scheme, will be able to do so.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1295. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if clarity will be provided regarding the eligibility for the pandemic unemployment payment of Irish citizens who have returned from abroad due to loss of employment owing to the Covid-19 crisis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6917/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced in March 2020 as a time limited emergency measure to meet the surge in unemployment in Ireland which resulted from the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic. In order to be eligible for this payment a person must have been resident in the state and in employment or self-employment on or after 6 March 2020 and have become fully unemployed due to the downturn in economic activity caused by the pandemic.

People who have returned to Ireland having lost employment abroad and who were not working in the state on or after 6 March 2020 are not entitled to the COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment. In the first instance they should apply for unemployment benefit in the country they last worked which may then be transferred to Ireland.

Where a person of any age is experiencing financial hardship they can apply for financial support through the means tested Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme from my department.

Dental Services

1296. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she has considered providing dentists with an advance in payments provided under the State schemes, that is, the medical card and PRSI akin to supports provided in Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Germany and other jurisdictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6918/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Dental services, provided to qualified contributors under the departments dental benefit scheme, are paid for monthly on an arrears basis, based on the contracted dentist submitting a claim for the treatment they provided to the qualified person.

The vast majority of such claims, over 97%, are submitted on line via the departments WelfarePartners portal, following confirmation of the customers eligibility, also obtained using this on-line facility. This effective and efficient process allows for the customers eligibility to be checked, treatment provided, fee request to be submitted and payment issued within the shortest possible timeframe. In short, payment for treatments provided in the month is lodged to the dentist's nominated account on the second Friday of the following month.

Any changes to Treatment Benefits would need to be considered in the overall budgetary and policy context.

Any question relating to payment for dental treatments on the medical card scheme should be addressed to the Minister for health.

Dental Services

1297. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she has considered a reduction in the rate of employer PRSI contributions in respect of dentists; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6920/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Government has introduced a number of initiatives to help employers and their employees during this difficult time. One of the main supports available is the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, which is operated by Revenue and provides the payment of support to employers in respect of eligible employees where the employer's business has experienced significant disruption due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In response to feedback from employer groups, trade unions and public representatives, this scheme was recently enhanced to include an increase in the subsidy paid in respect of workers earning less than €24,400 per year from 70% to 85%. Under the scheme, any payment made by employers in addition to the subsidy amount payable is liable to a PRSI charge of only 0.5%.

An initiative to specifically assist small businesses was approved by the Government last week. The €250 million Restart Grant will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following the closure of their businesses due to the pandemic.

The Government is continuously monitoring the situation, and will take further action, as necessary, as the Covid-19 situation evolves.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Domiciliary Care Allowance Data

1298. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the average percentage of applications for domiciliary care allowance which are refused; the percentage of refusals appealed; the percentage subsequently granted based on the appeal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6979/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): The last full year for which data on Domiciliary Care Allowance (DCA) is available is 2019. Details of the applications processed in 2019 are listed as follows, together with the outcomes, both at initial decision stage and subsequently on appeal.

DCA applications processed and outcomes 2019.

Year	Applications Processed	Awarded	Refused	Withdrawn
2019	8,784	5,886 (67%)	2,875 (33%)	23

Appeals processed 2019.

Year	Appeals finalised	Cancelled or Withdrawn	Revised by DCA section	Decided by Appeals Officer (AO)	Allowed by AO	Partially allowed	Not allowed by AO
2019	1,703	44	517	1,142	811 (71%)	10 (0.9%)	321 (28.1%)

The appeals finalised in any particular year do not generally correspond to applications refused in the same year, therefore it is not possible to provide an exact percentage of applications refused and subsequently appealed. For example appeals processed in the first half of a calendar year can typically refer to refusals from the previous calendar year or even earlier as acceptance of late appeals is at the discretion of the Chief Appeals Officer.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Pension Provisions

1299. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the home carer’s scheme will be extended to those born before 1 September 1946; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6982/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): In January 2018, I announced an Interim Total Contributions Approach (TCA) to calculate the entitlement of pensioners who reached state pension age on or after 1 September 2012 (i.e. those born on or after 1 September 1946) and who have a reduced rate pension entitlement based on post Budget 2012 rate bands.

People whose pensions were decided prior to 1 September 2012 were not affected by the Budget 2012 rate band changes. As a consequence, people whose pensions were calculated under the 2000-2012 rate bands were subject to a significantly more generous regime than those who qualified before or afterwards, as a Yearly Average of only 20 contributions per year (out of a maximum of 49) could attract a 98% pension.

There will be some people who have contributed less frequently into the Social Insurance Fund (which pays for contributory pensions), and who will therefore be below the threshold required for a maximum rate of the State Pension (Contributory). However, for those with insufficient contributions to meet the requirements for a State Pension (Contributory), they may qualify for a means tested State Pension (Non-Contributory), the maximum personal rate for which is €237 (over 95% of the maximum rate of the contributory pension). This rate of payment does not include rent allowance, household benefits or fuel allowance. Alternatively, if their spouse is a State pensioner and they have significant household means, their most beneficial payment may be an Increase for a Qualified Adult, based on their personal means, and amounting up to 90% of a full contributory pension.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 1300 answered with Question No. 1198.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1301. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the pandemic unemployment payment will be extended to persons over 66 and under 18 years of age who were working prior to the pandemic, to those in the gig economy and involved in precarious work who are ineligible due to not having worked on 6 March 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7012/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced as an emergency income support measure to meet the dramatic surge in unemployment as a consequence of the pandemic. The emergency payment supports people of working age from 18 and up to 66 years who became unemployed as a result of the pandemic and are not being paid by their employer. This age range is consistent with other Social Protection income supports paid to working age persons.

The primary State income support in respect of people who are aged 66 years or over is the State Pension – either the contributory State pension or the non-contributory pension, which is means tested. Those over 66 years do not pay social insurance contributions and can, if in receipt of State Contributory Pension, retain all of their State pension as well as their employment income and retain that pension if they lose employment, thus guaranteeing an income support. People in receipt of a reduced rate of non-contributory or means tested pension who are also in receipt of an employment income may have their pension payment increased if they lose that employment income or if it is reduced. Recipients of State pension payments may, subject to satisfying eligibility conditions, have access to a range of supports not available to unemployed people aged under 66. These include living alone increase, household benefits, telephone support allowance, free travel and free TV licence. Additionally, as part of the Department's response to the COVID-19 emergency, the Fuel Allowance season has been extended by four weeks.

A person under 18 years of age who has lost their employment and is living in the family home is treated as a dependent in relation to any social welfare payment payable to a parent.

As previously outlined, the COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced for people who were in employment or self-employment on or after 6 March 2020 and have become fully unemployed due to the downturn in economic activity caused by the COVID 19 pandemic. People who work in the gig economy or who are in precarious employment who do not satisfy these conditions are not entitled to the COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment

Payment. People in these circumstances may be eligible for either the social insurance based Jobseekers Benefit or the means-tested Jobseekers Allowance.

Where a person, of any age, is experiencing financial hardship they can apply for financial support through the means tested Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Departmental Contracts

1302. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the amount spent on external consultants by her Department in 2019; the average hourly rate; if caps or limits on such spending are in place; the way in which conflicts of interest are managed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7280/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): My Department engages consultancy service providers (individuals or organisations) to provide analysis that contributes to policy development. The procurement of such services supports my Department in providing a high quality service to the public in a cost-effective manner and is governed by a comprehensive regulatory framework.

Details of all contracts awarded over €25k by the Department are published each quarter on gov.ie. In addition, details are also published on etenders and on the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU) in accordance with procurement guidelines and legislation. Expenditure is closely monitored to ensure value for money. Requests for Tender (RfTs) and contracts drawn up are in accordance with the Office of Government Procurement best practice. RfTs and draft contracts contain provisions to deal with conflict of interest, remedies for delays or breach of contract.

Some consultancy contracts comprise once-off fees while others are paid by daily rate. Therefore, I am advised that it is not possible to break down expenditure by the hour. Details of the amount spent on external consultants by my Department for the period in question (2019) is set out in tabular format as follows.

Name of Consultant	Details of Consultancy	Expenditure
Crowe Advisory Ireland Limited	Provision of Financial and Economic Services	€12,238
Accenture	System Development, Support and Maintenance of the Civil Registration Computer System	€801,439
Deloitte	Data Strategy Project	€5,350
Mercer	Actuarial Calculations for Waterford Crystal Pensions	€1,491
Philip O’Reilly	Review of Information Systems Division (ISD) Computer Operations	€24,600
Working Time Solutions	Shift Roster design options for ISD Computer Operations	€23,124
Ruth Fitzgerald	Legal advice to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection	€8,140

Name of Consultant	Details of Consultancy	Expenditure
PWC	Data Specialist Services	€44,472
Sonas Innovation	Data Specialist Services	€211,609
Demarq	IT Administration	€16,174
Stormlands Ltd	IT Administration	€922
Institute for Employment Studies and Social Finance	Consultancy services in relation to Contracted Public Employment Services	€123,318 (includes expenditure in 2020)
Consult Hyperion	Data Privacy Impact Assessments	€128,192
INOUE	Pathways to Work Consultation	€7,000
Research Matters	Jobseeker and JobPath Customer Satisfaction Survey	€23,431
Elizabeth Costello	Social Inclusion Conference Report 2019	€2,600
Indecon	Review of National Action Plan for Social Inclusion	€90,824
ESRI	Measurement and Analysis of Household Income and Living Conditions Research Programme	€66,633
Total expenditure on consultancy in 2019		€ 1,591,557

Water Charges

1303. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans and proposals to assist businesses, especially in the tourism sector, in respect of reducing or waiving water rates and water charges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5719/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Since 1 January 2014, Irish Water has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local level. Irish Water charging policy is also subject to approval by the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities (CRU).

In this regard, my Department is maintaining close contact with Irish Water in relation to its response to the COVID-19 Emergency while also liaising with the CRU. Irish Water has acknowledged the challenges faced by their non-domestic business customers, such as those in the hospitality and services sector. The majority of customers primarily pay by volume usage which will have reduced significantly for those businesses, with any standing charges forming only a small element of any bill. Irish Water has undertaken to continue to work closely with these businesses to support them in terms of continued service provision and, in particular, through proactive engagement via its call centre (1850 778 778) and customer support staff, while the CRU will keep the matter under review.

It should be noted that Irish Water's new non-domestic tariff framework for business and commercial customers was due to come into effect on 1 May 2020. This has been deferred until the COVID-19 Emergency has abated in light of the significant uncertainty facing businesses and enterprises at the present time. This decision has been taken by Irish Water with the support of the CRU and my Department. The position will be reviewed in the coming months in light of emerging developments in relation to COVID-19.

Commercial Rates

1304. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of commercial rates for businesses during the Covid-19 pandemic (details supplied). [5876/20]

1314. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the commercial rates alleviation measures he has introduced in response to the Covid-19 crisis; if local authorities in counties Laois and Offaly have applied for such supports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5637/20]

1316. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if primary or secondary legislation will have to be enacted to operationalise a three month commercial rates waiver for Covid-19 impacted businesses as announced on 2 May 2020 (details supplied); and the cost of this waiver. [5673/20]

1377. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans to give a full moratorium from commercial rates to those businesses that are likely to be seriously impacted for at least a year such as hospitality, tourism and certain personal services such as hairdressers and so on to enable them to survive and rebuild their businesses after Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6807/20]

1378. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the businesses that can avail of the commercial rates waiver; if it is just reserved for businesses that have been forced to close due to Covid-19 restrictions; if businesses that have partially closed will be able to avail of the waiver; if businesses that have not been forced to close but nevertheless have experienced a significant drop in turnover will be able to avail of the waiver; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6819/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy John Paul Phelan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1304, 1314, 1316, 1377 and 1378 together.

The levying and collection of rates are legally matters for each individual local authority. Local authorities are under a statutory obligation to levy rates on any property used for commercial purposes.

In order to support the local government sector, my Department is continuing to keep local authority income, expenditure and cash flow generally under review and will continue to work with all local authorities on both collective and individual issues arising. In addition, my Department has engaged with the Departments of the Taoiseach, Public Expenditure and Reform, Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Employment Affairs and Social Protection, and Transport, Tourism and Sport in relation to commercial rates and local authority funding issues, as well as the role that local authorities may be in a position to play in supporting economic recovery.

To that end on 2 May 2020, Government announced that a waiver of commercial rates will apply to all businesses that have been forced to close due to public health requirements, from 27 March 2020, for a three-month period. These costs will be met by the Exchequer; the proposal is expected to cost €260m. The administration by local authorities of this measure will be by way of a credit in lieu of commercial rates. My Department is currently preparing further guidance on the scope and application of the waiver for local authorities. Individual applications by local authorities will not be required. No new primary or secondary legislation is needed to administer this measure.

The position will be reviewed at a later date as part of a wider review of options to support enterprise and employment, and associated local authority funding implications, once the unwinding of public health restrictions has advanced.

Planning Issues

1305. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if the harvesting of peat for the garden and mushroom growing industry will be permitted for 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6078/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Development, unless specifically exempted under the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (the 2000 Act), or the associated Regulations, requires planning permission. In the case of the harvesting of peat, Class 17 of Part 3 of Schedule 2 to the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended (the Regulations), provides that peat extraction in a new or extended area of less than 10 hectares, or peat extraction in a new or extended area of 10 hectares or more, where the drainage of the bogland commenced prior to the coming into force of those Regulations, is exempted development. Such exempted development is subject to a restriction under section 4(4) of the 2000 Act which states that exempted development status is lost if an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) under the EIA Directive or Appropriate Assessment under the Habitats Directive is required in respect of that development.

Where there is a question as to what in any particular case is or is not development, or is or is not exempted development, it is open to any person on payment of the prescribed fee to request a written declaration under Section 5 of the 2000 Act from the relevant planning authority, or from An Bord Pleanála (the Board) on referral. Any development that is not exempted development being carried out without planning permission or that does not comply with the terms of a planning permission is unauthorised development and may be subject to enforcement action by a planning authority.

In terms of unauthorised development requiring EIA or Appropriate Assessment, regularisation may be sought by way of the 'substitute consent' process set out at Part XA of the 2000 Act, which allows development that should have been the subject of environmental assessment, but was not, to be regularised where appropriate. In this context, I understand that An Bord Pleanála has in recent months received a number of applications for leave to apply for substitute consent in respect of peat extraction activities. It should be noted that except for certain quarry cases, where substitute consent is granted, such consent only regularises the past work that has been carried out and would not permit further development. A separate planning permission would be required for future development, in addition to the substitute consent.

Under Section 30 of the 2000 Act, I am specifically precluded from exercising any power or control in relation to any particular planning case with which a planning authority or the Board, is or may be concerned. An Bord Pleanála is an independent statutory body assigned responsibility to determine planning appeals and certain other matters under the 2000 Act, including applications for substitute consent.

In addition to the planning system, it should be noted that specified peat extraction may also require a licence from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under the Integrated Pollution Control (IPC) system, which is under the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

Registration of Title

1306. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the arrangements in place in the Land Registry to process existing applications including those that were submitted prior to the lockdown; the estimated delays; the actions that can be taken or are being taken to minimise delays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6485/20]

1307. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the areas in which the Land Registry and the Property Registration Authority fall within the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; the arrangements in place that will allow both authorities to fulfil their roles; if particular difficulties have been identified that impede their functions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6486/20]

1308. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the details of the backlog and time delays in the processing of existing applications and providing copies of files in the Property Registration Authority; the status of an application (details supplied); the number of applications that remain to be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6487/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1306 to 1308, inclusive, together.

The Property Registration Authority (PRA) is upscaling its operations in line with COVID-19 recovery planning. As part of a phased approach to business continuity, the PRA is implementing a graduated increase in the level of applications processed for registration. New work practices and projects are being successfully incorporated into this phased upscaling.

On 30 March 2020, the PRA announced a temporary reduction in services, effective until 12 April, to protect its employees and the public and to play its part in the national effort to prevent the spread of the COVID-19, in response to the announcement by An Taoiseach on 28 March. With the subsequent extension of COVID-19 restrictions until 5 May, the PRA reviewed its business continuity approach and announced a resumption of some services. In particular, from 14 April, the PRA began recording casework received up to 30 March on its system. Moreover, from 20 April, the PRA resumed taking in applications for Land Registry and the Registry of Deeds. In accordance with the national approach to tackling COVID-19, its public offices remained closed. However, it provided a copy instrument service for urgent property transaction closings.

The gradual upscaling of services which began on 14 April 2020 continues to be reviewed by the PRA in line with COVID-19 recovery planning, public health guidance and the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. This will allow the PRA to continue to scale up its operations, carry out its statutory functions and ensure that a safe working environment is in place for its employees and members of the public in all its buildings in Dublin, Waterford and Roscommon. At the same time, in line with the national approach, remote working arrangements will continue in place to ensure that safe physical distancing can be maintained.

Due to the current legal prohibition on the use of digital signatures for property transactions/registrations, the PRA's eRegistration service is limited to transactions that do not require a "wet signature" i.e. eDischarges (releases of mortgages) and eCharging Orders (Nursing Home scheme Charges). Accordingly, the majority of applications lodged in the PRA are paper-based legal deeds and documents. This creates challenges in rapidly enabling remote working for all case processing.

In this regard, preparatory work is underway, led by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, to provide the legal basis for the PRA to accept digitally signed documents for transactions involving registered land.

The number of transactions on hand in the PRA increased from 102,805 at end February to 113,866 at the end of April because of the COVID-19 restrictions. The upscaling of operations and a steady decrease in the intake of applications now being experienced will see the level of cases on hand decreasing again. Applications are being dealt with in order of priority. However, urgent applications are being processed expeditiously, as requested, on a case by case basis. As applications for registration are often complex, necessitating numerous legal queries, it is not possible to give representative timelines for dealing with cases.

Copy Folios/Maps and Copy Instruments are being issued. Customers can apply for copies in the normal way through the landdirect portal. Landdirect, eRegistration services and registration of deeds services continue to operate as normal.

In relation to any specific cases, arrangements have been put in place by all State bodies under the aegis of my Department to facilitate the provision of information directly to members of the Oireachtas. Further information in relation to the specific case referred to may be obtained by contacting the specific e-mail address in respect of the PRA, reps@prai.ie.

Building Control Management System

1309. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his views on correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6834/20]

1371. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans to implement the recommendations of the Joint Committee on the Environment, Culture and the Gaeltacht report on the title of architect published in 2013; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6702/20]

1387. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he will implement the recommendations contained in the July 2013 report titled Report on the Title of the Architect; his views on calls for the introduction of a grandfather clause for architects practising their profession here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6966/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1309, 1371 and 1387 together.

Part 3 of the Building Control Act 2007 introduced a system of statutory registration for architects and restricted use of the title of “architect” to persons who are registered architects.

Section 22 of the Act makes specific provision for registration based on technical assessment of persons who had been independently performing duties commensurate with those of an architect for a period of 10 or more years in the State prior to the commencement of the Act. This is, in effect, what is often colloquially referred to as a grandfather clause.

In 2013, in response in particular to the lower than anticipated rate of applications for registration by technical assessment, an independent review of the arrangements in place for registration was undertaken by Mr Garret Fennell, Solicitor. Mr Fennell’s report on the matter is available on my Department’s website at the following link:

<http://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/migrated-files/en/Publications/DevelopmentandHousing/BuildingStandards/FileDownload%2C34097%2Cen.pdf>.

The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Environment, Culture and the Gaeltacht also examined the matter and published its Report on the Title of Architect (July 2013) which is available at:

<https://www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/media/committees/archivedcommittees/environment-transportcultureandthegaeltacht/Report-on-the-Title-of-Architect.pdf>

Both reports, which were welcomed by my Department, made a number of recommendations intended to improve and streamline the arrangements for registration. Implementation of these recommendations, in consultation with the Architects Alliance of Ireland and others, has seen a number of reforms being implemented, which include the administration of the technical assessment process on a cyclical basis where briefing, guidance and support for candidates can be administered in a structured manner; mentoring and supporting applicants; facilitating assessment based on recent projects; facilitating applicants with reassessment/reapplication (i.e. ensuring that the technical assessment procedure is not seen as a one chance only route to registration); and reviewing and simplifying guidance materials with direct input from practice-trained persons. My Department and the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI), as registration body, are committed to continuing to work with the Architects Alliance of Ireland and others in this manner to achieve whatever further reasonable and practical improvements of registration arrangements can be made in the context of the Fennell report or otherwise.

In addition to the transitional “grandfather” provision set out above, section 14(2)(f) of the Act provides a permanent route to registration for practically trained persons who have 7 years appropriate practical experience and who have passed the prescribed register examination. In 2016, the Architects Alliance of Ireland proposed a special entry route to incorporate the proposed development of a prescribed register admission examination as currently provided for under this section. While the Act would allow me to prescribe such a register admission examination as a route to registration for eligible persons, neither I nor my Department have the remit or the competence to validate or approve the proposed register admission examination. Assessment for registration under section 14(2)(f) comes within the responsibility of the RIAI, who are designated as the registration body for the purposes of the 2007 Act, and as the competent authority for the purposes of the Directive on the mutual recognition of professional qualifications (as amended). For this reason, the Architects Alliance of Ireland were advised by my Department to discuss their proposal, in the first instance, with the RIAI as registration body and competent authority for the architectural profession in Ireland.

My Department and the RIAI, as registration body, are committed to continuing to work with the Architects Alliance of Ireland and all other stakeholders to achieve whatever further reasonable and practical improvements in registration arrangements can be made. I would encourage all practically trained persons to pursue the routes to registration which are open to them and to continue to engage constructively with my Department and the RIAI.

Departmental Contracts

1310. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if his Department has engaged the use of external consultants from 1 January 2020 to date; the details and costs of such engagements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5533/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy):

Consultants appointed by my Department since 1 January 2020, together with the purpose of each service engagement, the costs to date and the expenditure programme concerned, are set out in the following table. Consultancy service providers are only engaged by the Department where specific expertise is required which is not available in the organisation at the relevant time.

Consultant	Purpose of Consultancy	Contract cost	2020 Expenditure to date (Programme Area)
Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI)	Development of a heat pump standard - development of a standard operating procedure for the installation and maintenance of heat pumps	€15,000	€15,000 (Planning & Housing Research)
Quadra Consultancy Ltd	Carry out health and safety risk assessments throughout the Department in accordance with relevant statutory obligations	€6,327	€6,027 (Training & Development)
PMCA Economic Consulting	Provision of an expert report as part of Ireland's response to State Aid case SA 52512 concerning local authority health and leisure facilities	€9,225	€9,225 (Local Government)
Korn Ferry	Assist in identifying and engaging suitable candidates for consideration by the Assessment Panel in the recruitment of a non-Executive Director of Ervia Board	€36,900	€0 (Water Quality)

Social and Affordable Housing

1311. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the reason a family (details supplied) is deemed ineligible to be included on the housing waiting list with Galway County Council; his plans to address the anomaly by increasing the social housing eligibility income limits in Galway County Council to ensure that all families in receipt of social welfare payments are eligible to be considered for social house supports in the county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5555/20]

1349. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the income limits for eligibility for social housing per each category of household by county nationwide; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6184/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1311 and 1349 together.

Applications for social housing support are assessed by the relevant local authority, in ac-

cordance with the eligibility and need criteria set down in section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011, as amended.

The 2011 Regulations prescribe maximum net income limits for each local authority, in different bands according to the area concerned, with income being defined and assessed according to a standard Household Means Policy. The 2011 Regulations do not provide local authorities with any discretion to exceed the limits that apply to their administrative areas. Also under the 2011 Regulations, a household may apply for support to one housing authority only (the “housing authority of application”), which may be the authority for the area in which the household normally resides or with which it has a local connection, or where the authority agrees, at its discretion, to assess the household for support.

Under the Household Means Policy, which applies in all local authorities, net income for social housing assessment is defined as gross household income less income tax, PRSI, Universal Social Charge and Pension-Related Deductions within the meaning of Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act 2009. The Policy provides for a range of income disregards, and local authorities also have discretion to decide to disregard income that is temporary, short-term or once-off in nature.

A table setting out the details of the three bands and the limits currently applicable in each local authority area is available on my Department’s website at the following link: <https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/other/social-housing-support-table-income-limits>

The income bands are expressed in terms of a maximum net income threshold for a single-person household, with an allowance of 5% for each additional adult household member, subject to a maximum allowance under this category of 10%; and 2.5% for each child, subject to a maximum allowance under this category of 10%.

The income bands and the authority area assigned to each band were based on an assessment of the income needed to provide for a household’s basic needs, plus a comparative analysis of the local rental cost of housing accommodation across the country. It is important to note that the limits introduced in 2011 also reflected a blanket increase of €5,000 introduced prior to the new system coming into operation, in order to broaden the base from which social housing tenants are drawn, both promoting sustainable communities and also providing a degree of future-proofing.

Households in cities like Galway, Cork or Dublin may apply for areas of choice in the city and/or county area. Where a county area is specified, this is dependent on that household not exceeding the maximum net income threshold for the county area, which in the case of Galway County is €25,000 for a single person or €30,000 for a household of three adults and four children.

Given the cost to the State of providing social housing, it is considered prudent and fair to direct resources to those most in need of social housing support. The current income eligibility requirements generally achieve this, providing for a fair and equitable system of identifying those households facing the greatest challenge in meeting their accommodation needs from their own resources.

However, as part of the broader social housing reform agenda, a review of income eligibility for social housing supports in each local authority area is underway. The review will have regard to current initiatives being brought forward in terms of affordability and cost rental and will be completed when the impacts of these parallel initiatives have been considered.

Rent Pressure Zones

1312. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if the list of designated rent pressure zones to include Edenderry and Portlaoise will be updated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5597/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Section 24A of the Residential Tenancies Act 2004, as amended, provides that the Housing Agency, in consultation with housing authorities, may make a proposal to the Minister that an area should be considered for designation as a Rent Pressure Zone. Following receipt of such a proposal, the Minister requests the Director of the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) to conduct an assessment of the area to establish whether or not it meets the criteria for designation and to report to the Minister on whether the area should be designated as a Rent Pressure Zone. For the purpose of the Act, 'area' is defined as either the administrative area of a housing authority or a local electoral area within the meaning of section 2 of the Local Government Act 2001.

Previously, for an area to be designated a Rent Pressure Zone, it must have satisfied the criteria set out in section 24A(4) of the Residential Tenancies Act 2004 (as inserted by section 36 of the Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act 2016), as follows:

(i) the annual rate of rent inflation in the area must have been 7% or more in four of the last six quarters; and

(ii) the average rent for tenancies registered in the area with the RTB in the last quarter must be above the average national rent (i.e the National Standardised Rent in the RTB's Rent Index Report) in the last quarter (€1,226 per month in Q4 2019).

However, on 30 May 2019, I signed the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019 (Commencement) Order 2019 which appointed 31 May 2019 and 4 June 2019 as the dates on which specified provisions of the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019 came into effect, including provisions in respect of the average rent qualifying criterion for RPZ designation. Specifically, in relation to criteria (ii) above, the rent of a dwelling in the Greater Dublin Area (Kildare, Wicklow and Meath) will now be compared to the average rent across the country, excluding Dublin rents; and the rent of a dwelling outside of the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) will be compared to the average rent across the country, excluding Greater Dublin Area rents.

Each quarterly RTB Rent Index Report includes a summary in Table 9 of the data used to establish whether each Local Electoral Area fulfils the criteria for designation as a Rent Pressure Zone. This ensures transparency in relation to the position of individual areas in terms of average rent levels and increases. The quarterly Rent Index Reports are available to view on the RTB's website at the following link: <https://onestopshop.rtb.ie/news/latest-data-from-rtb-quarterly-rent-index-2>.

Further information on Rent Pressure Zones and designations is available on my Department's website at <https://www.housing.gov.ie/PUBLICATIONS>, by searching 'rent pressure zones - information'.

The Local Electoral Area (LEA) of Portlaoise, Co Laois was designated as a Rent Pressure Zone (RPZ) on 2 July 2019.

While rental inflation in the Edenderry LEA has been above 7% in 5 of the last 6 quarters, the standardised average rent in Edenderry in Q4 2019 was €781.21, which is below the Non-GDA Standardised Average Rent of €872.09 per month, thereby not satisfying the criteria for

designation as an RPZ at this time.

The Housing Agency and the RTB will continue to monitor national rents and if the Edenderry LEA meets the designation criteria it will be designated as a RPZ.

Rent Controls

1313. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if local authorities will continue to implement a rent freeze for the duration of the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5636/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The various differential rent schemes in place in local authorities provide for rents which are linked to a tenant's income. It should be noted that rents can go down where a person's income reduces. Accordingly, a rent freeze would not be appropriate as it would prevent downward rent movements in such circumstances and, therefore, no rent freeze has been implemented by local authorities.

Where a person resident in social housing has lost employment as a result of COVID-19, their local authority can review the rent payable to take account of this. In the current situation, local authority staff engaged on rents administration are prioritising the processing of these applications for downward rent reviews.

In relation to any household income increase that may be attributable to COVID-19 payments issued by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, I understand that local authorities are not currently increasing rents on foot of these payments on the basis that they are temporary in nature.

Question No. 1314 answered with Question No. 1304.

Planning Issues

1315. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans to further amend the deadlines and timelines regarding planning application processes. [5663/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): On 29 March 2020, the Government, following my request and taking account of the considerations under section 251A(5) of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, made an Order under section 251A(3) of that Act which resulted in the extension of time for a range of specified or appropriate periods and timelines in the Planning Acts and associated planning regulations.

In determining the end date of the Order, a number of additional days were added beyond the end of the period of the Government's public health 'stay at home' announcement to facilitate the return to normal business by planning authorities and public communication of revised arrangements in advance of the expiry of the section 251A Order. In this context, the date of 20 April 2020 was specified in the Order as the date on which the period to be disregarded under section 251A(1) of the Planning Act was to end, comprising a period of 23 days.

Arising from the decision of the Government to extend the COVID-19 related measures restricting the movement of the public until 5 May 2020, the Government on 16 April 2020 made

20 May 2020

an Order under Section 251A(4) of the Planning Act further extending the duration of all relevant periods and timelines specified in planning legislation by an additional 19 days, up to and including 9 May 2020. As the Government has since decided to extend further the COVID-19 related restrictive measures until 18 May 2020, the Government has now made an additional Order under section 251A(4) of the Planning Act extending the duration of all relevant periods and timelines specified in planning legislation by an additional 14 days, up to and including 23 May 2020.

The three Orders have the combined effect of extending the relevant planning periods and timelines by an aggregate of 56 days/8 weeks. Notifications of these Orders, including reference to an updated FAQ document, have been issued in circular letters to all planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála. The updated FAQ document, relevant Circulars and the Government Orders, as well as additional information, are also available on my Department's main COVID-19/Planning webpage at:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/planning/covid-19-coronavirus/clarification-operation-planning-system-during-current-covid-19>

The planning system has a key role to play in the post COVID-19 recovery and as restrictions are unwound, I expect that the latest Order, which is effective until 23 May, will be the last such Order made under section 251A of the Planning and Development Act 2000.

Question No. 1316 answered with Question No. 1304.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1317. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the assistance or supports his Department can provide to students who have paid for student accommodation and cannot get a refund from the accommodation provider; if he has been in contact with student accommodation providers on the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5698/20]

1359. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his views on whether it is appropriate that colleges are not refunding rents paid by students for on-campus accommodation for the period that they have been unable to attend campus (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6483/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1317 and 1359 together.

With effect from 27 March 2020, new emergency measures were introduced into law to protect tenants during the COVID-19 emergency period. Tenants cannot be forced to leave their rental accommodation during this period, other than in exceptional circumstances. Initially, these emergency legislative provisions will last for a period of 3 months, but they may be extended if the Government considers it necessary.

My Department has published a Guidance Document on COVID-19 supports for landlords and tenants which sets out the emergency rental measures and income and other supports available to tenants and landlords during the emergency period. The Guidance document is available at:

https://onestopshop.rtb.ie/images/uploads/general/COVID_Update_Guidance_Document_final.pdf

and a list of Frequently Asked Questions has been developed and is available at:

https://onestopshop.rtb.ie/images/uploads/Comms%20and%20Research/FAQs_on_Emergency_Legislation_Final.pdf.

The Residential Tenancies Acts 2004-2019 provide for minimum notice periods to be served by tenants and landlords for tenancy terminations – for example, a student must provide 28 days notice to end a tenancy of less than 6 months duration or 35 days to end a tenancy of more than 6 months but less than 1 year.

The Acts do not prescribe specific terms and conditions regarding the payment of rents or deposits for inclusion in individual letting agreements in the private rental market including the student-specific accommodation sector. Contract law governs such arrangements.

The specific terms associated with an individual student's rights and obligations are likely to be set out in a written contract signed by both the student and the landlord. Engagement between the parties to clarify the respective contractual obligations of the student and the landlord is key in establishing whether a breach of contract had occurred.

I understand that where State universities have closed due to COVID-19, they are generally providing refunds in respect of their directly owned student-specific accommodation.

Students may wish to contact their third level education providers to seek any assistance that they might be in a position to provide. If a student cannot come to an agreement with their accommodation provider, they might wish to contact the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) regarding their concerns – <https://www.rtb.ie/> – or to refer a dispute for resolution with regard to the non-refund of their deposit.

The RTB was established as an independent statutory body under the Residential Tenancies Act 2004 to operate a national tenancy registration system and to resolve disputes between landlords and tenants. Due to the quasi-judicial nature of work of the RTB, it would be inappropriate for me, as Minister, or my Department to comment on or intervene in the specifics of any individual case.

Emergency Accommodation Provision

1318. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the contact details in his Department for the section taking inquiries from accommodation providers who wish to provide emergency accommodation for Covid-19 related cases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5702/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): My Department's role in relation to homelessness involves the provision of a national framework of policy, legislation and funding to underpin the role of housing authorities in addressing homelessness at local level. Statutory responsibility in relation to the provision of accommodation and associated services for homeless persons rests with individual housing authorities.

Any person or organisation who is interested in making properties available for use as emergency accommodation should contact the relevant local authority. Local authorities are also seeking properties under the various social housing funding schemes to provide homes for families in emergency accommodation and on the social housing waiting lists.

Social and Affordable Housing

1319. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government when the fourth quarter social housing pipeline report will be published. [5706/20]

1320. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of homes that have been delivered in total; the number of affordable housing units from statutory and administrative schemes delivered; the number of Part V units delivered; and the number of cost reduced housing units that have been delivered via the local infrastructure housing activation fund. [5708/20]

1324. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the breakdown of the 2019 social housing output by criteria (details supplied); and the categories by each local authority in tabular form. [5729/20]

1325. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of Part V units delivered in 2019 by kilocalories authority and average cost by local authority in tabular form. [5730/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1319, 1320, 1324 and 1325 together.

My Department publishes comprehensive statistics on a quarterly basis on all social housing delivery activity under Rebuilding Ireland. This is published on the statistics page of my Department's website, at the following link:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordble/overall-social-housing-provision>

These data provide a breakdown of social housing delivery across the range of mechanisms referred to. However, it should be noted that no categories of "Local Authority Lease to buy" or "Approved Housing Body Lease to buy" exist.

In addition to the statistical overview of activity in each local authority, a detailed Social Housing Construction Status Report (CSR) is published which provides scheme level detail on new build activity under Rebuilding Ireland. The most recent publication covers the period up to the end of Q4 2019 and was published on 14 May 2020. This report is available on the Rebuilding Ireland website at the following link:

<https://rebuildingireland.ie/news/minister-murphy-publishes-social-housing-construction-status-report-for-q4-2019-2/>

A total of 1,326 Part V homes were delivered by local authorities and Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) for social housing in 2019. A further detailed breakdown of these homes across all local authority areas in the period up to end Q4 2019 is available at the following link:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordble/overall-social-housing-provision>

While statistics have been collated in relation to Part V delivery, a unit cost analysis of these homes has not yet been undertaken.

With regards to the number of homes delivered via the Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund (LIHAF), the following table details the number of completed homes up to Q4 2019. Figures in respect of Q1 2020 are currently being collated.

Local Authority	Project Name	Residential Units Delivered to Date	Social/Part V	Cost Reduced/ More Affordable
Cork County	Carrigaline	180	0	0
Fingal	Oldtown/ Mooretown	379	8	211
Kildare	Naas	190	15	150
Meath	Ratoath	106	2	10
South Dublin	Adamstown SDZ	1,202	120	459
Cork City	Glanmire	13	0	3
Fingal	Donabate	66	0	66
Limerick	Mungret	26	0	26
	Total	2,162	145	925

The individual sales price of homes that are delivered following the construction of the LIHAF facilitating infrastructure is not recorded by my Department. However, by way of example, Meath County Council has confirmed it will be offering units at Ratoath at a discount of 10% to the relevant open market prices. In Cork City, the LIHAF project at Glanmire will see 110 homes delivered with a discount of approx. €20,000 each on the open market price.

Housing Provision

1321. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of the St. Michael's Estate cost rental project in Inchicore, Dublin 8. [5709/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Acknowledging that renters in Dublin and other major urban centres are currently facing significant housing access and affordability challenges, the Government is committed to the introduction of a Cost Rental sector in Ireland. My Department is developing a national policy approach for this new form of rental tenure. This work includes the development of two pathfinder projects on local authority-owned sites, at Enniskerry Road in Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown, and at Emmet Road in Dublin City, from which lessons will be drawn to inform an optimum model for Cost Rental delivery at the national level.

The latter project, at Emmet Road in Inchicore, incorporates the site of the former St Michael's Estate referred to by the Deputy. Dublin City Council (DCC), the site owner, has advised it is continuing to make progress on the design and planning work for this project. It has appointed a dedicated project manager and project team, and has completed a development framework plan for the project. Most recently, DCC has just completed the procurement process to secure an architect-led integrated design team, who will now be responsible for detailed design of the scheme, obtaining all statutory consents and the delivery on site of a new sustainable neighbourhood.

Overall, it is projected that this site can accommodate 484 homes in a high-quality mixed tenure development, including 375 Cost Rental apartments. DCC intends that the remaining homes will be provided for social housing and is engaging with my Department in terms of funding for that part of the project. DCC is also engaging with the European Investment Bank, which has signaled funding support in principle in respect of the Cost Rental housing element of the project.

Planning Issues

1322. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he will allow for the relaxation of rules by local authorities for the provision of street furniture by cafés and restaurants when they reopen. [5723/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The licensing of street furniture and other appliances on public roads and footpaths is governed by section 254 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (the Act), and associated Regulations. Under Article 201(b) of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended, this includes the provision of tables and chairs outside a hotel, restaurant, public house, or other establishment where food is sold for consumption on the premises.

Under section 254(4) of the Act, an application for such a licence shall be made to the relevant planning authority, or the Board on appeal, who, in determining an application or appeal, are required to have regard to -

- the proper planning and sustainable development of the area,
- any relevant provisions of the development plan or local area plan,
- the number and location of existing appliances, apparatuses and structures on the public road or footpath, and
- the convenience and safety of road users including pedestrians.

In the context of the current Covid-19 pandemic, such consideration of street furniture licence applications and appeals should also take into account relevant public health, health and safety and other related protocols.

While I will keep this regulatory framework under review, its implementation at a local level will continue to be a matter primarily for individual local authorities.

Commercial Rates

1323. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the chief executives of local authorities he has engaged with regarding the issue of rates and reimbursements of rates freeze in each local authority; and the outcome of each engagement. [5724/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy John Paul Phelan): The levying and collection of rates are legally matters for each individual local authority. Local authorities are under a statutory obligation to levy rates on any property used for commercial purposes.

In order to support the local government sector, my Department is continuing to keep local authority income, expenditure and cash flow generally under review and will continue to work with all local authorities on both collective and individual issues arising.

My Department wrote to the Chief Executive of each local authority on both 24 March 2020 and 2 May 2020 in relation to commercial rates alleviation measures in response to COVID-19.

Engagement with the City and County Management Association (CCMA) has been critical in formulating the measures taken to date, specifically the initial deferral of rates and the subse-

quent 3 month waiver for businesses forced to close. The CCMA has engaged proactively with my Department to assess the potential financial cost of the impact of COVID-19 in terms of commercial rates. Most recently my Department has had on-line meetings with representatives of the CCMA on 21 April, 6 May, 8 May, 12 May and 13 May in respect of the matter.

Questions Nos. 1324 and 1325 answered with Question No. 1319.

Social and Affordable Housing

1326. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of new social housing units delivered via SHCEP in 2019; the number of units by type of lease involved (details supplied); and the average cost of the lease by lease type in tabular form. [5731/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The Social Housing Current Expenditure Programme (SHCEP) supports the delivery of social housing by providing financial support to local authorities and Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) for the leasing of houses and apartments. The SHCEP budget funds the ongoing current costs of homes delivered using a variety of different delivery mechanisms through the Housing Leasing Programmes under Rebuilding Ireland, including:

- Leasing -Direct and Enhanced Leasing, AHB and Private Mortgage to Rent (MTR), the Repair and Leasing Scheme (RLS);
- Build - Capital Advance Leasing Facility (CALF) Build, CALF Part V, Part V Lease; and
- Acquisition - CALF Acquisition, Housing Agency Acquisitions (HAA).

Dwellings made available under the programme are used to accommodate households from local authority waiting lists.

A total of 4,365 homes were delivered under schemes funded by SHCEP in 2019. Details of the number of homes delivered in 2019 by scheme, together with the average annual cost of each lease type, are set out in the following Table. The average cost is calculated based on claims for operational new units submitted by local authorities and recorded on the Department's SHCEP financial management system at end 2019.

Table: SHCEP Delivery and Average Lease Cost 2019

-	Dwellings Delivered	Average Annual Cost by Lease Type
LA lease from private owner (including Enhanced Leasing)	739	€10,696
AHB Lease from private owner	129	€8,349
MTR (AHB and Private)	214	€10,144
AHB NAMA SPV	3	€16,726
RLS (LA and AHB)	76	€5,666
CALF Build	2,032	€12,835
Part V	733	€14,534
CALF Acquisition	247	€11,745
HAA	192	€12,484

-	Dwellings Delivered	Average Annual Cost by Lease Type
Total	4,365	€12,197

Traveller Accommodation

1327. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the allocation and drawdown by each local authority of their Traveller accommodation budget in tabular form. [5732/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): In accordance with the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998, housing authorities have statutory responsibility for the assessment of the accommodation needs of Travellers and the preparation, adoption and implementation of multi-annual Traveller Accommodation Programmes (TAPs) in their areas. My Department's role is to ensure that there are adequate structures and supports in place to assist the authorities in providing such accommodation, including a national framework of policy, legislation and funding.

Data in relation to the allocations and drawdowns of funding for Traveller-specific accommodation, by local authority, in 2019 are set out in the following table. In 2020, to facilitate ease of access to such funding, my Department is no longer allocating specific budgets to individual local authorities from the €14.5m in funding available overall. Instead, it is open to all local authorities to apply for and drawdown funds at any time through the year and this is actively encouraged by my Department. Details of the drawdowns by individual local authorities to date in 2020 are also set out in the following table.

County Council	Allocation 2019 €	Drawdown 2019 €	Drawdown 2020 €
Carlow	70,000	381,898	-
Cavan	95,458	94,500	-
Clare	635,000	669,389	-
Cork City	275,799	42,319	1,286,109
Cork County	258,390	184,745	-
Donegal	161,816	-	8,230
Dublin City	1,628,695	895,197	184,973
Dun Laoghaire / Rathdown	-	32,834	-
Fingal	-	848,957	-
Galway City	-	-	24,000
Galway County	1,412,596	670,440	24,034
Kerry	77,200	75,131	5,928
Kildare	1,000,000	360,231	-
Kilkenny	21,682	408,856	640
Laois	-	-	179,796
Leitrim	178,390	-	-
Limerick City	1,015,179	1,424,782	430,255
Longford	2,922	-	-
Louth	132,531	341,863	-

County Council	Allocation 2019 €	Drawdown 2019 €	Drawdown 2020 €
Mayo	-	-	-
Meath	75,000	91,790	-
Monaghan	100,000	-	-
Offaly	815,117	692,329	-
Roscommon	253,084	73,843	-
Sligo	1,435,913	1,131,397	512,676
South Dublin	130,557	106,719	-
Tipperary	25,655	-	-
Waterford City	170,000	77,562	-
Westmeath	100,000	-	-
Wexford	335,000	52,870	-
Wicklow	104,533	-	-
Reserve	2,489,484		
Total allocation	10,510,516		
TOTAL	13,000,000	8,657,652.00	2,656,641

Water and Sewerage Schemes

1328. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government when the increased payment for private domestic wells will be rolled out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5757/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): In 2019, I announced details of the new Multi-Annual Rural Water Programme 2019-2021. This included an improved funding scheme for individual wells and work on the development of this scheme is at an advanced stage.

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 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.

My Department required legal advice in relation to the drafting of the regulations which are required for the new grant scheme. That process is now almost complete and I hope to be in a position to make an announcement on the commencement of the new scheme shortly.

Vacant Properties

1329. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of the publication of an independent research proposal on property vacancies by the Housing Agency as outlined in the National Vacant Housing Reuse Strategy 2018-2021;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5794/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The National Vacant Housing Reuse Strategy, published in July 2018, strives to provide a targeted, effective and co-ordinated approach to identifying and tackling residential vacancy across the country, drawing together all of the strands of ongoing work into one document. The Housing Agency, in addition to providing vital supports to local authorities in identifying and reactivating vacant properties, also supports the development of policy designed to tackle residential vacancy through research and analysis as part of the strategy.

Further to this commitment, the Housing Agency funded Dr. Philip Crowe of Space Engagers to carry out a research report entitled “How Vacancy is created and used: Case studies from Scotland, Denmark, and Philadelphia” on behalf of the Housing Agency, the Heritage Council and Mayo County Council. Dr. Crowe also undertook an associated research project entitled “Incentives for the reuse of vacant buildings in town centres for housing and sustainable communities in Scotland, Denmark and France”.

Both research reports were published in March 2019 and are available on the Housing Agency website at the links below.

<http://www.housingagency.ie/publications/how-data-vacancy-created-and-used-case-studies-scotland-denmark-and-philadelphia>

<http://www.housingagency.ie/publications/incentives-re-use-vacant-buildings-town-centres-housing-and-sustainable-communities>

Local Authority Housing

1330. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of social houses acquired under the Housing Agency vacant housing fund in each year since the fund was introduced; and the average cost of these acquisitions in each year since the scheme has been in operation. [5847/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Under Rebuilding Ireland, direct capital funding is provided to the Housing Agency to facilitate the acquisition of suitable portfolios of properties for social housing from financial institutions and investors.

An acquisitions fund of €70 million, which is a revolving fund, was established with effect from 1 January 2017 with the objective of acquiring some 1,600 units over the period to 2021 for social housing use. This has enabled the Housing Agency to actively engage with banks and investment companies in relation to the acquisition of properties. The fund is replenished by the Agency through the sale of units primarily to the Approved Housing Body (AHB) sector and the funds received are recycled back into the fund for future acquisitions. AHBs utilise private finance as well as Capital Advance Leasing Facility (CALF) and Payment and Availability (P&A) funding available from my Department to fund these units.

Property acquisition and subsequent sale to AHBs is a process that can take some time, therefore, in order to maximise the potential for use of properties acquired by the Agency in the intervening period, an innovative Caretaker Lease arrangement has been developed. This allows the Agency to assign a property to an AHB who can carry out any necessary repairs and liaise with the Local Authority to tenant the unit, in parallel with the onward acquisition of the unit.

Up to end Q4 2019, a total of 747 properties had been purchased by the Agency using the Fund and placed on caretaker leases with AHBs or sold to local authorities. The onward sale of 445 of these homes to AHBs has been completed in full. In addition, in excess of 120 properties are in the process of proceeding to purchase close, being placed on caretaker leases, or transferred to Local Authorities. Overall, this activity represents close to 50% of the original target of the Fund which is intended to be achieved over the six year period of Rebuilding Ireland.

New homes acquired through the Fund and made available to AHBs under Caretaker Lease are included in my Department's overall quarterly reporting which is available at the following link:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordble/overall-social-housing-provision>

The year by year breakdown specifically relating to the Fund and included in the overall reporting for Rebuilding Ireland is set out in the following Table.

Year	No. of units	Average Cost
2017	36	€198,792
2018	481	€188,656
2019	230	€178,669

Local Authority Housing

1331. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of social houses acquired under the repair and leasing scheme in each year since it was introduced; and the average cost of the leases in each year since the scheme has been in operation. [5848/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The Repair and Leasing Scheme (RLS) was developed to assist private property owners and local authorities or approved housing bodies (AHBs) to harness the accommodation potential that exists in certain vacant dwellings across Ireland. RLS has both capital and current funding streams. The capital element funds the repairs to the property; the current element funds the lease payment to the property owner with the cost of the repairs being recovered from the property owner by offsetting it against the lease payment.

At the end of 2019, a total of 165 dwellings had been delivered through RLS. Total output under the scheme by year, together with the average annual lease cost, is set out in the following table.

Table: RLS Delivery and Average Annual Cost 2017 to 2019

Year	Dwellings Delivered	Average Annual Cost
2017	9	€7,919
2018	80	€6,023
2019	76	€5,666
Total	165	€5,970

Local Authority Housing

1332. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Gov-

ernment the number of social houses acquired under the buy and renew scheme in each year since the fund was introduced; and the average cost of these acquisitions in each year since the scheme has been in operation. [5849/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Under my Department's Social Housing Investment Programme, funding is available to all local authorities to deliver additional social housing stock through the acquisition of new and previously owned houses/apartments for social housing use, including delivery through the Buy and Renew Scheme.

Activity in this regard is largely delegated to local authorities so they can respond flexibly to all opportunities to provide new social housing. Since the Buy & Renew Scheme was introduced in late 2016, local authorities have delivered over 550 new social homes under the scheme to the end of 2019, as follows -

Year	Units	Average Delivery Cost per Unit
2016/7	176	€174,000
2018	223	€210,000
2019	160	€191,000

Local Authority Housing

1333. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of social homes brought on-stream under the enhanced leasing scheme in each year since the scheme was introduced; and the average annual cost of these leases in each year. [5850/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): My Department introduced the Enhanced Long Term Social Housing Leasing Scheme in order to target newly built or yet to be built houses and apartments for long term leasing, and to target property developers and investors who are in a position to deliver housing at a reasonable scale in order to supplement delivery under Pillar 2 of Rebuilding Ireland. The Enhanced Leasing Scheme places a significant additional obligation on the lessor with respect to the ongoing management and maintenance of the properties under contract, work that would normally be carried out by the Local Authority on its own stock. This includes day to day maintenance, cyclical maintenance and all the associated operational risks, in addition to the initial construction risks carried by the lessor. In exchange, the lessor receives up to 95% of the open market rent.

The first call for proposals for the Enhanced Leasing Scheme was open from January to April 2018 and a total of 33 submissions were received. The second call for proposals closed on 25th October 2018 and a total of 22 submissions were received.

The first Agreement for Lease was signed in Q2 2019 for 23 new social housing homes, with expected delivery in 2020. The first homes delivered under the Enhanced Leasing Scheme were delivered in Q4 2019, bringing the total to 113 homes. No payments were made by my Department for these units in 2019 but the estimated average annual lease cost for 2020 for these 113 units is €22,221. Delivery to date has been concentrated in the Dublin area; as the scheme matures, it is expected that more units will be delivered in other locations and, accordingly, the average cost will be reduced.

Local Authority Housing

1334. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of voids brought back into the housing stock in each of the years 2016 to 2019; and the number of these that were previously vacant for longer than six months in tabular form. [5851/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Under the Voids Programme funded by my Department, 7,333 vacant social housing homes were returned to productive use in the period 2016-2019. This figure does not include homes which were returned to productive use by local authorities using funding from their own resources. See the following table for full breakdown by local authority of the units funded by my Department:

	Units Re- turned in 2016	Units Re- turned in 2017	Units Re- turned in 2018	Units Re- turned in 2019	Units Re- turned 2016 - 2019
Carlow	8	8	38	14	68
Cavan	32	31	14	9	86
Clare	79	47	43	62	231
Cork City	263	81	74	69	487
Cork County	98	48	205	70	421
Donegal	89	168	86	43	386
Dublin City	575	543	495	495	2,108
Fingal	147	121	48	22	338
South Dublin	81	87	61	89	318
Dún Laoghaire- Rathdown	19	31	50	83	183
Galway City	29	11	3	3	46
Galway County	37	37	45	39	158
Kerry	90	90	98	61	339
Kildare	24	8	27	11	70
Kilkenny	14	16	15	13	58
Laois	12	4	12	23	51
Leitrim	51	0	30	22	103
Limerick	18	13	24	75	130
Longford	23	0	3	19	45
Louth	8	7	13	5	33
Mayo	25	22	20	5	72
Meath	76	52	59	22	209
Monaghan	47	38	52	13	150
Offaly	53	7	10	18	88
Roscommon	80	3	2	2	87
Sligo	68	40	100	40	248
Tipperary	102	107	63	72	344

	Units Re-returned in 2016	Units Re-returned in 2017	Units Re-returned in 2018	Units Re-returned in 2019	Units Re-returned 2016 - 2019
Waterford	90	52	20	55	217
Westmeath	43	40	23	7	113
Wexford	17	34	8	29	88
Wicklow	10	11	24	13	58
	2,308	1,757	1,765	1,503	7,333

One of the key objectives of the Voids Programme is to provide local authorities with funding to help minimise the turnaround and re-let time of vacant units. Data in relation to how many of these properties were vacant for longer than six months is not collated. However, statistics in relation to the social housing stock are published by the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) in their Annual Reports on Performance Indicators in Local Authorities. These reports provide a range of information in relation to social housing stock, including the average time taken to re-tenant a dwelling. The most recent report, relating to 2018, is available on the NOAC website at the following link: <http://noac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/NOAC-Performance-Indicator-Report-2018-1.pdf>.

House Purchase Schemes

1335. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of applications, approvals and drawdowns and the average amount approved and drawn down from the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme by local authority in each year since the scheme was introduced in tabular form. [5853/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): My Department publishes information on the overall number and value of (i) local authority loan approvals and (ii) local authority loan drawdowns. Local authority approval means that an official letter of offer has been sent to a borrower (and therefore relates to a specific property and loan amount).

Information on the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan for 2019, including the number and value of mortgage approvals and drawdowns, as well as average loan amounts, are available on my Department's website at the following link:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/statistics/house-prices-loans-and-profile-borrowers/local-authority-loan-activity>

This information will be updated on a quarterly basis as additional data is compiled.

Information on the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan for 2018 is also available through this link and can be found under local authority loans approved and local authority loans paid, however these figures are not detailed by loan type.

The Housing Agency provides a central support service which assesses applications for the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan on behalf of local authorities and makes recommendations to the authorities to approve or refuse applications. Housing Agency recommendations are then considered by the Credit Committee in each local authority, which issues loan approvals.

Each local authority must have in place a Credit Committee and it is a matter for the Com-

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mittee to make the final decision on applications for loans, in accordance with the regulations, and having regard to the recommendations made by the Housing Agency. The value of pending applications is not tracked by my Department.

I have asked the Agency to compile figures on the numbers of applications that it has assessed and recommended to approve since the scheme began. In 2018, the Housing Agency assessed 3,036 valid applications. Of these, it recommended 1,550 for approval.

Local Authority	Applications Assessed	Recommended to Approve
Carlow County Council	46	16
Cavan County Council	17	7
Clare County Council	50	19
Cork City Council	105	53
Cork County Council	241	133
Donegal County Council	30	18
Dublin City Council	351	215
Dún Laoghaire - Rathdown County Council	82	45
Fingal County Council	437	229
Galway City Council	64	30
Galway County Council	108	41
Kerry County Council	89	40
Kildare County Council	173	87
Kilkenny County Council	28	15
Laois County Council	72	36
Leitrim County Council	9	2
Limerick City & County Council	81	46
Longford County Council	30	15
Louth County Council	73	31
Mayo County Council	46	18
Meath County Council	198	124
Monaghan County Council	21	6
Offaly County Council	38	14
Roscommon County Council	28	13
Sligo County Council	39	20
South Dublin County Council	214	112
Tipperary County Council	80	29
Waterford City & County Council	43	14
Westmeath County Council	26	17
Wexford County Council	85	43
Wicklow County Council	132	62
Total	3,036	1,550

In 2019, the Housing Agency assessed 2,649 valid applications. Of these, it recommended

1,307 for approval.

Local Authority	Applications Assessed	Recommended to Approve
Carlow County Council	35	16
Cavan County Council	7	2
Clare County Council	46	21
Cork City Council	133	49
Cork County Council	203	90
Donegal County Council	27	5
Dublin City Council	309	180
Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	64	34
Fingal County Council	363	215
Galway City Council	52	30
Galway County Council	92	24
Kerry County Council	70	26
Kildare County Council	32	22
Kilkenny County Council	43	21
Laois County Council	65	29
Leitrim County Council	12	3
Limerick City & County Council	70	43
Longford County Council	29	13
Louth County Council	91	38
Mayo County Council	43	14
Meath County Council	141	99
Monaghan County Council	52	18
Offaly County Council	26	12
Roscommon County Council	37	14
Sligo County Council	35	15
South Dublin County Council	174	91
Tipperary County Council	75	39
Waterford City & County Council	86	28
Westmeath County Council	37	18
Wexford County Council	89	44
Wicklow County Council	111	54
Total	2,649	1,307

Social and Affordable Housing

1336. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of the delivery of affordable homes to rent and buy in the Poolbeg SDZ and the Clonburris SDZ; the details of the financing of the schemes; and if the financing of the schemes will deliver affordable homes to purchase at less than €250,000 and affordable homes to rent at less than €900 per month. [5854/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Delivery of more affordable homes to rent or buy is a priority for the Government. My De-

partment has developed a range of measures to assist local authorities to provide homes of this nature, which are being utilised at the two sites referred to by the Deputy.

The regeneration of Poolbeg West is the next logical step in transforming the Docklands area, given its strategic location east of Grand Canal Dock, with close proximity to important bridge connections to Dublin Port and North Lotts. The extent of vacant brownfield land available is significant, at 34 hectares.

The Poolbeg West Strategic Development Zone (SDZ) has the potential to deliver up to 3,500 homes in close proximity to the city centre. To improve access to this strategically important site, €15.75 million of funding under the Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund has already been allocated, which includes €11.81m from my Department. The SDZ planning scheme requires the delivery of 15% homes for social and affordable housing purposes, which is in addition to the statutory 10% under Part V arrangements.

In relation to the wider activation of these lands, it is understood that NAMA is currently undertaking a process to select a preferred bidder to develop the lands in the SDZ scheme area. My Department remains committed to working with Dublin City Council, any relevant Approved Housing Bodies and either the receiver and/or developers of the SDZ area in order to secure additional social and affordable housing from this site over and above Part V obligations and of the order of magnitude laid out in the adopted planning scheme. This will be subject to agreement on all the normal and relevant terms, including value for money aspects.

In relation to the Clonburriss SDZ, which has the capacity to provide up to 11,000 homes, approved funding under LIHAF is being made available for infrastructure to support the delivery of over 1,000 homes in the first phase of activity. While South Dublin County Council has confirmed that a development agreement has not yet been completed regarding this housing provision, by leveraging the value of the LIHAF infrastructure, a significant number of the homes delivered will be available at prices below market value.

In addition, funding under the Serviced Sites Fund (SSF) has been approved to support the Council's plans to deliver a further 90 social and 133 homes for purchase under the affordable purchase scheme (although it is anticipated that the number of affordable homes may increase as the project develops). These homes will be sold at rates which are below open market values and for which South Dublin County Council has estimated a price range of €253,000 to €263,000. At these prices, using the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan, a couple with a joint income in the region of €45,000 would be in a position to buy such a home.

The Council has indicated that a development partnership between the site owners and the Council will see a detailed design for the full site finalised later this year.

Proposed Legislation

1337. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if the drafting of the marine planning and development management Bill is complete; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5862/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The finalised General Scheme of the Marine Planning and Development Management Bill was approved by Government in December 2019.

Further policy work is continuing on the development of certain aspects of the proposed regime and intensive engagements in that regard are ongoing with the Department of Commu-

nications, Climate Action and Environment, who are leading the development of the provisions specific to Offshore Renewable Energy. In addition to the policy development work, engagement is also continuing with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel, other Departments and agencies on the drafting process.

Following confirmation of the Bill's priority within the next Government Legislation Programme, my Department will begin a stakeholder and public consultation on the legislation. It will also be necessary to undergo pre-legislative scrutiny with the relevant Joint Oireachtas Committee, once established. The report prepared by the Committee in due course will be considered by my Department ahead of reverting to Government to seek approval to publish the final legal text of the Bill.

Further enabling measures will be required post-enactment to bring the new regime into operation, including necessary regulations, statutory guidelines and transitional arrangements.

Social and Affordable Housing

1338. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if the public sector benchmark used for the first bundle of social housing public private partnerships will be published; and the status of each of the three bundles of the social housing PPP scheme by numbers of units, locations of units, names and members of the consortia delivering the bundles and the total cost of each bundle. [5863/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The Social Housing Public Private Partnership (PPP) Programme is designed to deliver approximately 1,500 social housing homes in total, via three bundles.

The first bundle, which comprises six sites, will provide 534 homes across the Greater Dublin Area, as set out in the following table.

Site (Local Authority)	Number of Homes
Ayrfield, Malahide Road (Dublin City)	150
Corkage Grange (South Dublin)	109
Scribblestown (Dublin City)	70
Dunleer (Louth)	80
Convent Lands, Wicklow Town (Wicklow)	51
Craddockstown, Naas (Kildare)	74
Total	534

The contract with the winning bidder for this Bundle, Comhar Housing, reached Financial Close on 19 March 2019. This consortium comprises Macquarie Corporate Holdings PTY Ltd. as primary equity provider, Sisk as Construction Contractor and equity provider, Choice Housing as Facility Managers and Oaklee Housing (AHB) as tenancy management service provider.

The full value of the Bundle 1 contract, the duration of which includes the construction period plus a 25-year operating period, is estimated in nominal terms at €301 million (exclusive of VAT but including a forecast of inflation). This cost was publically released following financial close of the project and includes all construction costs plus maintenance, operating, lifecycle, tenancy management and financing costs.

Construction under Bundle 1 was well advanced prior to the closure of sites as a result of COVID-19. While the full impact of Covid-19 measures on the programme has still to be de-

terminated, the first homes from this bundle are expected to be completed in June 2020. Upon completion, service provision under the contract will include building and asset management, waste management, security, void management, tenant helpdesk services and the provision of community development services. At the end of the service period, the homes will be handed over to the relevant local authority.

Bundle 2 of the programme will provide 465 homes across eight sites, as set out in the following Table.

Site (Local Authority)	Number of Homes
The Walk, Roscommon Town (Roscommon)	53
The Miles, Clonakilty (Cork County)	52
Slievekeale (Waterford City and County)	58
Ballyburke (Galway City)	74
Shannon East (Clare)	51
Poundhill, Skibbereen (Cork County)	50
Oakwood, Macroom (Cork County)	50
Butterstream, Clane (Kildare)	77
Total	465

The contract with the winning bidder for this Bundle, Torc Housing Partnership, reached Financial Close on 27 November 2019. This consortium is comprised of a joint venture of JJ Rhatigan & Co. and the Spanish firm Obrascón Huarte Lain S.A. as construction contractors. Upon completion of construction, facilities management will be provided by Derwent FM and Tuath Housing Association during the 25-year service period, with Tuath also providing tenancy management. These bodies are also providing equity for the project in conjunction with the primary equity providers Equitix Ltd. and Kajima Partnerships Ltd. The German bank Nord/LB is providing debt funding for the project.

The full value of the Bundle 2 contract, the duration of which includes the construction period plus a 25-year operating period, is estimated in nominal terms at €253 million (exclusive of VAT but including a forecast of inflation). This cost was publically released following financial close of the project, and as per Bundle 1, this includes all construction costs plus maintenance, operating, lifecycle, tenancy management and financing costs.

Construction had commenced on the Bundle 2 sites prior to the onset of COVID-19 and, similar to Bundle 1, the full impact of the Covid-19 measures on the programme remains to be determined. The service provisions attached to the contract are also consistent with Bundle 1 and at the end of the service period the homes involved will be handed back to the relevant local authority.

Preparation work has recently commenced on the third Bundle of sites in the programme. A number of sites were proposed by local authorities on foot of a request seeking nominations of sites for consideration as part of the third bundle. Following examination and evaluation of the sites proposed, initial approval in principle was communicated to the successful local authorities in October 2019, subject to final due diligence that has recently been completed. Three sites were selected in the Dublin City Council local authority area, and one each in Kildare, Sligo, and Wicklow.

The following table sets out the indicative number of homes that will be provided at each of these locations pending the design and planning phases, with the total number of homes across the whole bundle expected to be in the region of 440.

Site (Local Authority)	Indicative Number of Homes (pending design and planning)
Ready Mix Site, East Wall, Dublin 3 (Dublin City)	65
Shangan Road, Ballymum, Dublin 9 (Dublin City)	100 Senior Citizen Units
Collins Avenue, Dublin 9 (Dublin City)	90
Ardeew, Athy (Kildare)	60
Rathellen, Finisklin (Sligo)	50
Blessington (Wicklow)	76
Total	c.441

The National Development Finance Agency (NDFA), in its role as procuring authority and financial advisor, and Dublin City Council as lead local authority and Sponsoring Agency, have commenced the initial planning for the tender process and engagement with the relevant local authorities. It is planned that tenders will be invited in 2021 and therefore it is not possible to give details on costs at this stage.

The Public Sector Benchmark (PSB) is an essential part of any PPP project. It contains commercially sensitive information in relation to the methodology used for costing public sector projects and for the pricing of risks by public sector bodies. In accordance with Department of Public Expenditure and Reform guidelines (Guidelines for the use of Public Private Partnerships), the final PSB, or any elements thereof, is not made public during the tendering process nor where it is intended to procure further similar projects in the near future (e.g. subsequent project bundles as part of an ongoing PPP programme). As Bundle 3 will follow the same structure as Bundles 1 and 2 and given the potential impact on value for money for the State, it is not appropriate to release the PSB for Bundle 1 at this time.

However, and in accordance with Department of Public Expenditure and Reform guidelines, once an appropriate period of time has elapsed and the commercial sensitivity of the information on the project is no longer an issue (having regard also to any other similar PPP projects which may be in pre-procurement), the PSB should be made public. My Department will follow these guidelines in relation to the social housing PPP programme.

Tenant Purchase Scheme

1339. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government when the final report of the review of the tenant purchase scheme will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5873/20]

1380. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of progress of a new local authority tenant purchase scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6881/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1339 and 1380 together.

The Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme, which came into operation on 1 January 2016, is open to eligible tenants, including joint tenants, of local authority houses that are available for sale under the Scheme. To be eligible, tenants must meet certain criteria, including having a minimum reckonable income of €15,000 per annum and having been in receipt of social housing support for at least one year.

In line with the commitment given in Rebuilding Ireland, a review of the first 12 months of

the Scheme's operation has been undertaken. The review has incorporated analysis of comprehensive data received from local authorities regarding the operation of the scheme during 2016 and a wide-ranging public consultation process which took place in 2017 and saw submissions received from individuals, elected representatives and organisations.

This issue is part of a significant body of work undertaken in my Department in relation to the broader social housing reform agenda. I expect that the review will be published once all the work on these reform measures is completed.

Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund

1340. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the capital expenditure on the LIHAF from 1 January to 31 December 2019 by his Department; the amount by each subhead; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5877/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): As an initiative of the Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness, the Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund (LIHAF) is primarily designed to fund the provision of public off-site infrastructure to relieve critical infrastructure blockages and enable housing developments to be built on key sites at scale.

30 projects received final LIHAF approval with an overall budget of €195.7m, of which €146.8m will be Exchequer funded, with the remainder funded via local authorities. Of the 30 projects, Kildare County Council has confirmed that its project on the Naas Inner Relief Road will not now progress, although an element of the housing delivery that was associated with the project has taken place.

Details of the approvals by local authority area, budget allocation, project description and projected housing delivery are available at www.rebuildingireland.ie/LIHAF.

Currently, 3 LIHAF projects have completed infrastructure construction. Of the remaining 26, up to the end of April (and excluding the Naas project), 14 projects have been approved to go to, or are already at, infrastructure construction stage. Of the remaining 12 projects, 3 are expected to have tenders approved and go to construction before the end of Q3 2020. Nine are not yet ready to go to infrastructure tender stage; my Department is reviewing these projects and considering requests from local authorities for extensions to the funding agreements as and when they arise.

In terms of LIHAF funding drawdown, thus far, most infrastructure projects have been at the design, planning and procurement stages, and the bulk of expenditure will arise during the construction phase. This is reflected in the level of expenditure to end Q1 2020, with approximately €37.731 million in Exchequer funds drawn down (matched by a further 25% local authority funding bringing the total expenditure to €50.308m). Drawdown of LIHAF Exchequer grant funding from my Department commenced with €1.604m in 2017, a further €6.815m in 2018, €22.244m in 2019 and approximately €7.068m to end Q1 2020.

The following table details the Exchequer funding (75%) drawn down for each project in 2019.

Local Authority	Project Name	Drawdown of LIHAF funding Exchequer Contribution (75%) for 2019 (€)
Clare	Claureen, Ennis	69,410
Cork City	Old Whitechurch Road	3,306,887
Cork City	South Docks	130,222
Cork City	Glanmire	361,700
Cork County	Midleton (Water-rock)	101,171
Cork County	Carrigaline	396,848
Dublin City	Dodder Bridge	221,277
Dublin City	Belmayne and Clongriffin	314,602
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown	Cherrywood	1,984,303
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown	Woodbrook Shanganagh	0
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown	Clay Farm	0
Fingal	Donabate Distributor Road	6,848,556
Fingal	Oldtown Mooretown	1,752,466
Fingal	Baldoyle Stapolin	0
Kildare	Naas	232,626
Kildare	Maynooth	209,533
Kildare	Sallins	0
Kilkenny	Ferrybank	32,024
Kilkenny	Western Environs	3,036,632
Limerick	Mungret	917,829
Louth	Newtown Drogheda	56,333
Louth	Mount Avenue Dundalk	68,817
Meath	Ratoath	557,540
Meath	Farganstown, Navan	327,039
South Dublin	Kilcarbery/Corkagh Grange	549,859
South Dublin	Clonburris SDZ	12,461
South Dublin	Adamstown	606,355
Waterford City and County Council	Gracedieu	60,000
Waterford City and County Council	Kilbarry	60,000
Westmeath	Brawny Road, Athlone	30,000

Defective Building Materials

1341. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans to introduce a latent defects redress scheme in view of the meeting his Department had with a group (details supplied). [5950/20]

1390. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he has considered the proposals from organisations (details supplied) regarding the way in which to deal with the serious structural defects of many Celtic Tiger era apartments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6972/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1341 and 1390 together.

I acknowledge the very stressful circumstances which owners and residents face when their homes are affected by construction defects.

My colleague Minister English along with officials from my Department, met with the groups referred to by the Deputies earlier this year in relation to their proposals, which I understand were also circulated by the groups to all Oireachtas members. I am advised at that meeting the current position regarding building defects in private dwellings was outlined, which is that, in general, building defects are matters for resolution between the contracting parties involved, the homeowner, the builder, the developer and/or their respective insurers, structural guarantee or warranty scheme.

While my Department has overall responsibility for establishing and maintaining an effective regulatory framework for building standards and building control, it has no general statutory role in resolving defects in privately owned buildings, including dwellings, nor does it have a budget for such matters.

I believe that the building control reform agenda already well underway provides a comprehensive roadmap for embedding an enhanced culture of compliance and accountability within the construction industry and for strengthening the building control framework in Ireland. The reform agenda includes:

- amendments made to the Building Control Regulations;
- the National Building Control Management Project; and
- the ongoing development of new legislation through the Building Control (Construction Industry Register Ireland) Bill.

Local authorities have extensive powers of inspection and enforcement under the Fire Services Acts 1981 and 2003, the Building Control Acts, the Housing Acts and the Planning and Development Acts. Fire services may inspect buildings in cases of defects or complaints in respect of fire safety. They work with building owners to ensure that immediate risks are addressed and that a plan is put in place, where required, for works to bring buildings into compliance.

My focus will remain firmly on ensuring the full roll out of the building control reform agenda, to ensure that all those that engaged in the construction sector take their responsibilities seriously and are appropriately held to account. As part of the reform agenda, consumer protection will continue to be my core concern and any proposals in that regard will, of course, be considered.

Private Rented Accommodation

1342. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if the RTB should hear cases from tenants who have had their deposits retained by landlords or other disputes, but that are not in tenancies covered by the Residential Tenancies Act 2004 but that have faced issues of evictions and non-refunding of deposits (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5963/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Section 3 of the Residential Tenancies Acts 2004 - 2019 provides that those Acts apply to every

dwelling the subject of a tenancy, subject to certain exemptions. Section 3(2)(g) provides that those Acts do not apply to a dwelling within which the landlord also resides.

Section 37 of the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019 extended the application of the Residential Tenancies Acts to certain licences for student-specific accommodation.

The Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) was established as an independent statutory body under the Residential Tenancies Act 2004 to operate a national tenancy registration system and to resolve disputes between landlords and tenants. Due to the quasi-judicial nature of work of the RTB, it would be inappropriate for me, as Minister, or my Department to comment on or intervene in the specifics of any individual case including with regard to the jurisdiction or otherwise of the RTB to deal with a particular dispute.

Emergency Accommodation Provision

1343. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of units for emergency accommodation currently being used in hotel settings. [5965/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): My Department publishes a monthly report on homelessness. The monthly report is based on data provided by housing authorities and produced through the Pathway Accommodation & Support System (PASS). The report captures details of individuals utilising State-funded emergency accommodation arrangements that are overseen by housing authorities. Official homeless reports are published on my Department's website on a monthly basis and can be accessed using the following link: <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data>.

These reports include information broken down by accommodation type at regional level. Emergency accommodation provided in a hotel is included within the private emergency accommodation (PEA) category along with other commercially provided emergency accommodation arrangements. Details on the numbers of individuals currently accommodated specifically in hotels may be available from the relevant local authorities.

Defective Building Materials

1344. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the details of the pyrite-MICA scheme for affected residents in County Mayo; if he has reconsidered the scheme in view of feedback he received; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5983/20]

1345. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he has received correspondence from Mayo County Council in relation to changing the provisions of the pyrite-MICA scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5988/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1344 and 1345 together.

The Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks in Construction (Remediation) (Financial Assistance) Regulations 2020 have been made under sections 2 and 5 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1979 to provide for a grant scheme of financial assistance to support affected homeowners in the counties of Donegal and Mayo to carry out the necessary remediation works to dwellings that have been damaged due to defective concrete

blocks.

The regulations came into operation on 31 January 2020 and my Department is currently in the process of finalising guidelines, which will be available in the coming weeks, to promote and support a consistent approach to the operation and administration of the scheme by Donegal and Mayo County Councils, which would allow for the receipt of applications to commence without delay.

I have not received correspondence from Mayo County Council in relation to changing the provisions of the scheme. It is important to note that the full terms and conditions of the scheme, including the making of the regulations referred to above, were finalised in consultation with the Attorney General's Office and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. This process took account of the comprehensive engagement that took place between my Department and both Donegal and Mayo County Councils, who will operate and administer the scheme.

The defective concrete blocks grant scheme is primarily a grant scheme of financial assistance to support affected homeowners to carry out the necessary remediation works to dwellings that have been damaged due to defective concrete blocks. The scheme outlines five remedial options ranging from rebuilding on existing foundations to replacing of external walls. The maximum approved costs per dwelling under the scheme range from €55,000 to €275,000, depending on the remedial option. A grant of 90% of the approved costs associated with the necessary remediation works, subject to a maximum for each remedial option, or 90% of the actual cost of the remedial works, whichever is the lesser, is available under the scheme.

The scheme is targeted at assisting a restricted group of homeowners who have no other practicable options to access redress. It is not a compensation scheme and the regulations apply only in respect of qualifying works that have not commenced prior to confirmation of grant approval being issued in respect of a dwelling by the relevant local authority. Homeowners cannot seek the recoupment of costs associated with the remediation of a dwelling undertaken either prior to the commencement, or outside, of the scheme. This is in line with how similar Government schemes operate or have operated in the past, where prior approval is a key eligibility requirement.

Budget 2020 provides funding of €40 million to fund the operation of the pyrite remediation scheme and the defective concrete blocks grant scheme this year. Funding for future years will be agreed on an annual basis as part of the normal Estimates process. Mindful that the scheme is being funded from the Exchequer, the scope of the scheme cannot be open ended. The funding available must be used prudently to achieve the most efficient and cost effective outcomes.

Fire Service

1346. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if funding will be provided for a new fire station at Ballybay, County Monaghan; when he expects this development to be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6047/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): The provision of fire services in local authority areas, including the establishment and maintenance of fire brigades, the assessment of fire cover needs and the provision of premises, is a statutory function of the individual fire authorities under the provisions of the Fire Services Acts, 1981 and 2003. My Department supports the fire authorities through setting general policy, providing a central training programme, issuing guidance on operational

and other related matters and providing capital funding for priority infrastructural projects.

In February 2016, my Department announced a five-year Fire Services Capital Programme with an allocation of €40 million, based on an annual €8 million allocation, to be used for the purchase of fire appliances and specialist equipment, building or upgrading of prioritised fire stations, an upgrade of the communications and mobilisation system and improvements to training centres.

The Ballybay Station Project is included under the 2016 – 2020 Capital Programme. In order to maximise the Capital Programme funding available, my Department re-assesses the status of projects in the capital programme on an annual basis and priority may be adjusted to bring forward more advanced projects offering best value-for-money taking account of the state of readiness of projects in the programme more generally. My Department has requested a detailed cost plan for this Project and once received will continue working with the Council to progress it.

Planning Issues

1347. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if his Department will consider reintroducing planning permission processes in certain limited circumstances; if he has considered the use of libraries as part of the process due to the fact that libraries are to reopen soon and persons could make an appointment to view ongoing applications in a similar manner to the way in which the public routinely make appointments to view active planning permissions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6086/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated public health restrictions introduced by the Government, three Orders have been made to date under Section 251A of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (the Act), disapplying the period from 29 March 2020 to 23 May 2020 inclusive (i.e. a period of 8 weeks or 56 days) in the calculation of any appropriate period, specified period or other timeline in the Act or other related planning legislation.

The signing of these Orders is primarily aimed at ensuring that the public participation requirements in the planning processes are not diminished during the period of the COVID-19 public health restrictions. Taking account of national and sectoral return to work protocols, planning is underway to allow for certain decision making processes under the planning system to advance shortly. This will include the inspection of planning application files in the offices of the planning authority in accordance with Article 18(1)(e) of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended (the Regulations).

Provision is already made under Article 27(5) of the Regulations for the making available of the weekly lists of planning applications for inspection for a period of not less than 8 weeks, beginning on the day on which it is made available, in or at the offices of the planning authority, and in each public library and mobile library in its functional area and at any other place or by any other means, including electronic form, that the authority considers appropriate.

In the context of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, published on 1 May last, my Department is working with planning authorities on various options to support public participation in these circumstances and facilitate the advancement of certain decision making processes on expiry of the period under the Orders made under Section 251A. This may include, in the context of the phased return to full opening of planning offices, the putting in place of arrangements, by appointment, for the viewing of planning application files

either in hard copy or electronically at the public counters of the planning offices or the local public libraries, subject of course to adhering to physical distancing and other public health and health and safety protocols in place to protect both local authority staff and members of the public. This would be in addition to the making available of the weekly lists of planning applications at local libraries as referred to above.

The final detailed arrangements in relation to facilitating public participation in the planning system, including the viewing of planning files by members of the public, will be publicised in advance of the expiry of the period under the Orders made under Section 251A.

Pyrite Remediation Programme

1348. **Deputy Darragh O'Brien** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the progress of the pyrite remediation applications for residents in an area (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6182/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The Pyrite Resolution Act 2013 provides the statutory framework for the Pyrite Remediation Scheme. The Pyrite Resolution Board, with the support of the Housing Agency, is responsible for the implementation of the pyrite remediation scheme.

In accordance with the provisions of the Act, the Board is independent in the performance of its functions, and as Minister, I have no role in the operational matters pertaining to the implementation of the scheme. The Board may be contacted by phone at Lo call 1890 252842 or by email to info@pyriteboard.ie or alternatively at oireachtasinfo@pyriteboard.ie.

Question No. 1349 answered with Question No. 1311.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1350. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if amendments to planning regulations will be introduced to facilitate small businesses that are no longer able to work out of their business premises as a result of the Covid-19 health measures and therefore need to operate from their home. [6197/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): It is important to note that wherever a business operates, it will be subject to the same public health measures to protect the health of both employees and the wider public from the COVID-19 pandemic. The re-opening of businesses in the context of the pandemic should be in accordance with the terms of the Government's Roadmap for Re-Opening Society and Business, as published on 1 May 2020, and with relevant public health and health and safety advice and protocols.

With regard to planning, an individual can apply to his/her local planning authority for a determination under section 5 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, as to whether any particular case is or is not development, or is or is not exempted development, within the meaning of the Act. This would inform the small business owner whether or not planning permission is required for him or her to operate from his or her home.

The granting of planning permission or a declaration that development is exempted development does not solely authorise development, including 'change of use' of premises, to proceed where other consents are required. The operation of a business may be subject to multiple

requirements of which planning is just one. I have no plans to introduce new exempted development planning regulations allowing for the ‘change of use’ of a home to a business premises at this time.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1351. **Deputy Colm Brophy** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans to extend the Covid-19 emergency legislation for tenants past the initial 90-day period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6201/20]

1358. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he will consider recommending an extension of the measures to prevent evictions, serving notices of termination and rent increases due to public health measures remaining in place beyond the current deadline; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6384/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1351 and 1358 together.

With effect from 27 March 2020, new emergency measures were introduced into law to protect tenants during the COVID-19 emergency period. Rent increases are prohibited and tenants cannot be forced to leave their rental accommodation, other than in exceptional circumstances, during the COVID-19 emergency period. Initially, these emergency laws will last for a period of 3 months, but they may be extended if the Government considers it is necessary.

Under the legislation, the process for any extension of the 3 month period involves the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government requesting the Government to make an Order, having consulted with the Minister for Health and with the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. The Government must consider it appropriate and be satisfied that it is in the public interest to extend the emergency period having regard to:

- the threat to public health;
- the highly contagious nature of COVID-19; and
- the need to restrict the movement of persons to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The consideration of whether to request the Government to make an Order to extend the emergency period will be made at the appropriate time and in accordance with the relevant legislation.

Septic Tanks

1352. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government when the multi-annual rural water programme due to run from 2019 to 2021 will be implemented to allow for grants for septic tanks to be upgraded; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6219/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I approved a new funding scheme for on-site wastewater treatment systems (more commonly known as septic tanks) under the Multi-Annual Rural Water Programme 2019-2021 to replace the current grant which was brought into operation by the Domestic Waste Water Treatment System (Financial Assistance) Regulations 2013. The grant scheme is also being expanded

to support the attainment of water quality objectives in what are called ‘high status objective catchment’ water areas and ‘prioritised areas for action’, as identified in the River Basin Management Plan for Ireland 2018-2021.

In developing the necessary regulatory and administrative changes to underpin the revised and improved grants scheme, my Department has met and consulted with key stakeholders, including the County and City Management Association, the Local Authority Waters Programme Office and the Environmental Protection Agency.

My Department also required legal advice in relation to the drafting of the regulations which are required for the new grant scheme. That process is now almost complete and I hope to be in a position to make an announcement on the commencement of the new scheme shortly.

Private Rented Accommodation

1353. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if his attention has been drawn to institutional landlords availing of mortgage holidays from banks; and if so, if mortgage holidays are not being passed on to tenants but are fuelling dividends to shareholders. [6272/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): My Department recently published a Guidance Document on COVID-19 supports for landlords and tenants which sets out the emergency rental measures and income and other supports available to tenants and landlords during the emergency period. The Guidance document is available at:

https://onestopshop.rtb.ie/images/uploads/general/COVID_Update_Guidance_Document_final.pdf.

and a list of Frequently Asked Questions has been developed and is available at:

https://onestopshop.rtb.ie/images/uploads/Comms%20and%20Research/FAQs_on_Emergency_Legislation_Final.pdf.

Support for buy-to-let mortgage holders with tenants affected by COVID-19 is being provided by the banking sector, including mortgage repayment breaks of up to 6 months by some financial institutions.

Any landlord facing potential difficulties in making loan repayments because of COVID-19 is advised to contact their bank or credit servicer as early as possible. All of the existing protections for customers who face actual or potential financial difficulties continue to apply. Banks, retail credit and credit servicing firms have introduced payment breaks on mortgages, personal loans and business loans for some business and personal customers affected by COVID-19.

My Department has no information on private contractual agreements between landlords and their finance providers nor between landlords and their tenants.

Social and Affordable Housing

1354. **Deputy Noel Greally** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the criteria for repayment of proceeds following the sale of an affordable home by a person who had originally purchased this home from a local authority; if the same repayment rules apply for each local authority; if solicitors and auctioneers fees can be deducted before

the repayment amount is calculated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6307/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Affordable housing arrangements under the 1999 Affordable Housing Scheme and Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000, provided for the payment of a “clawback” to the local authority. This was in the event that the affordable dwelling was sold by the purchaser within 20 years, such “clawback” being a percentage of the proceeds of the sale. The relevant provisions were set out in section 9 of the Housing Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 2002 and section 99 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, respectively.

The interpretation of these provisions is a matter for local authorities in the first instance. The repayment of the charge is a matter for the solicitor acting for the local authority and the solicitor acting for the individual selling the property to deal with. However, it is my Department’s view that these provisions do not mean that solicitors and auctioneers fees incurred by the purchaser in selling the dwelling can be deducted from the proceeds of the sale before calculating the clawback amount.

Social and Affordable Housing

1355. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the capital grants provided to Galway City Council in 2018 and 2019, respectively, under the social housing investment programme to assist in the construction and renewal of social rented accommodation for persons and families who have been assessed as in need of housing support under categories (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6308/20]

1356. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of the construction and renewal of social rented accommodation for persons and families who have been assessed as in need of housing support under categories (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6309/20]

1357. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the capital grants provided to Roscommon County Council in 2018 and 2019, respectively, under the social housing investment programme to assist in the construction and renewal of social rented accommodation for persons and families assessed as in need of housing support under categories (details supplied). [6361/20]

1361. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O’Connor** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the details of capital grants provided to Carlow County Council in 2018 and 2019, respectively, under the social housing investment programme to assist in the construction and renewal of social rented accommodation for persons and families who have been assessed as in need of housing support under categories (details supplied). [6540/20]

1379. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the details of capital grants provided to Tipperary County Council in 2018 and 2019, respectively, under the social housing investment programme to assist in the construction and renewal of social rented accommodation for persons and families who have been assessed as in need of housing support under categories (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6870/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1355 to 1357, inclusive, 1361 and 1379 together.

My Department provides funding to local authorities to support a broad range of housing programmes, including the delivery of new social homes through build, acquisition and leasing and programmes which support maintenance, upgrades and improvement works to existing social housing stock.

The funding provided to Tipperary County Council, Galway City Council, Roscommon County Council and Carlow County Council in 2018 and 2019 in respect of the various construction programmes, social housing improvement works, Traveller Accommodation and Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability are set out in the following tables (in which “build” encompasses local authority and approved housing body build activity, regeneration and public private partnerships).

Budget 2020 provided for the largest amount of funding that Government has ever invested in housing in a single year, €2.63 billion, and this funding will support the continued delivery of the full range of housing programmes this year. The 2020 funding details in respect of the various housing programmes and the associated output targets are set out in the Revised Estimates for Public Services 2020 publication, which is available at the following link:

www.gov.ie/en/collection/e20037-revised-estimates/.

A full detailed breakdown of delivery by local authority area is available on my Department’s website at the following link:

www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordble/overall-social-housing-provision. In addition, the Q4 2019 Social Housing Construction Status Report, which contains scheme by scheme information on the progress of over 26,015 new social housing homes, either currently approved and progressing through planning, design and construction, as well as homes delivered to end Q4 2019, is available on the Rebuilding Ireland website at the following link: <https://rebuildingireland.ie/news/minister-murphy-publishes-social-housing-construction-status-report-for-q4-2019-2/>.

In addition to capital assistance provided for the categories requested by the Deputy, it should be noted that my Department also provides capital assistance for the acquisition of homes for social housing, and also current funding for leasing homes, in addition to funding under the Housing Assistance Payment and the Rental Accommodation Scheme.

Tipperary County Council	2018 €m	2019 €m
Social Housing Build	4.27	13.57
Traveller Accommodation	0.04	0
Social Housing Improvement Works	1.49	2.62
Private Housing Grants	2.92	2.94

Galway City Council	2018 €m	2019 €m
Social Housing Build	11.23	21.96
Social Housing Improvement Works	0.24	0.17
Private Housing Grants	1.03	0.81

Carlow County Council	2018 €m	2019 €m
Social Housing Build	6.03	14.71
Traveller Accommodation	0	0.38
Social Housing Improvement Works	0.72	0.37
Private Housing Grants	1.55	1.34

Roscommon County Council	2018 €m	2019 €m
Social Housing Build	1.62	4.06
Traveller Accommodation	0.10	0.07
Social Housing Improvement Works	0.31	0.17
Private Housing Grants	0.76	1.08

Question No. 1358 answered with Question No. 1351.

Question No. 1359 answered with Question No. 1317.

Planning Issues

1360. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the estimated cost if the budget for the Office of the Planning Regulator increased by 12%. [6533/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR), headed up by the new Planning Regulator, was established on 3 April 2019.

The OPR is responsible for the independent assessment of all local authority and regional assembly forward planning, including development plans, local area plans, regional spatial and economic strategies. It can also review the organisation, systems and procedures used by any planning authority or An Bord Pleanála in the performance of any of their planning functions. In addition, the OPR has powers to drive national research, training, education and public information programmes to establish best practice in planning matters and highlight the role and benefit of proper planning.

The OPR is funded from my Department's Vote and the Revised Estimates provision for the OPR in 2020 amounts to a total of €2,569,000. If the budget allocation for the OPR was to be increased by 12%, the additional cost would amount to €308,280.

Question No. 1361 answered with Question No. 1355.

Planning Issues

1362. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the details of a right of way agreement in County Cork (details supplied); and if he

will make a statement on the matter. [6549/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy John Paul Phelan): Pursuant to the Registration of Deeds and Title Act 2006, the Property Registration Authority (PRA) is the registering authority in relation to property registration in Ireland and, subject to the aforementioned Act, is independent in the performance of its functions.

Arrangements have been put in place by all State bodies under the aegis of my Department to facilitate the provision of information directly to members of the Oireachtas. The contact e-mail address in respect of the PRA is reps@prai.ie.

However, with regard to the specific query, I understand that although the PRA can confirm if a right of way exists, it could not provide details of any deeds or documents relating to the registration of the right, as those would be available only to the registered owner and in order to deal with such a query, the PRA would also require details such as the folio number or the application number under which the right of way was registered.

Arts Centres

1363. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of a project (details supplied). [6570/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The Cork Event Centre is included as a commitment under Project Ireland 2040 and it underlines the Government's objectives around urban regeneration, enhanced amenity and heritage, associated quality of life standards, balanced regional development, and the regeneration and development of Cork City Centre.

It was agreed in the context of Budget 2020 that responsibility at central Government level for making the grant aid support available for the project would transfer to my Department. In that context, funding was allocated to my Department to support the project.

Responsibility for the advancement of proposals for the development of the Cork Event Centre remains, in the first instance, a matter for Cork City Council.

Local Authority Funding

1364. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the measures which will be taken to alleviate funding deficits in local authorities due to the Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6573/20]

1391. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the measures being taken to provide funding for local authorities for lost income from commercial rates, parking charges and other sources of income due to the current Covid-19 crisis; the length of time the measures will be in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6991/20]

1397. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if a commitment will be given to each local authority that all funds lost to the authorities due to the pandemic will be covered by central Government and not impact on other grants and local authority funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7014/20]

20 May 2020

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy John Paul Phelan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1364, 1391 and 1397 together.

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, my Department has taken a number of measures to assist local authorities with the financial difficulties they are experiencing.

At the outset and to minimise cash flow challenges, my Department arranged for the early payment of Local Property Tax (LPT) to all local authorities. As a short term measure, my Department made €136m available to local authorities as cash flow support in early April, in order to ensure that vital services that local authorities deliver can be maintained. This support was comprised of the early payment of the Local Property Tax allocation ordinarily paid from the Local Government Fund in May and July.

On 2 May 2020, the Government announced that a waiver of commercial rates will apply to all businesses that have been forced to close due to public health requirements, from 27 March 2020, for a three-month period. The costs involved, estimated to be €260m, will be met by the Exchequer. My Department is currently preparing further guidance for local authorities on this initiative.

In order to support the local government sector generally, my Department will continue to keep local authority income, expenditure and cash flow generally under review and will continue to work with all local authorities, both collectively and individually.

Planning Issues

1365. **Deputy Stephen Donnelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of and the likely delays to decisions being made in the context of local authority delays to planning permission decisions; the related timelines of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6616/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Further to the COVID-19 related restrictive (including stay at home) measures introduced on foot of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020, enacted on 27 March 2020, and subsequent extensions of the initial restrictive measures, the Government has, to date, made three Orders under section 251A of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, extending the duration of all relevant periods and timelines specified in planning legislation by a cumulative total of 56 days/8 weeks. This has been done to maintain the integrity of the planning system and to ensure that public participation requirements therein are not diminished.

The Orders made to date mean that a planning authority will have the normal period of 8 weeks, together with an additional period of up to 8 weeks, i.e. up to 16 weeks in total, to determine a planning application. The Orders also mean that an interested person will have the normal period of 5 weeks, together with an additional period of up to 8 weeks, i.e. up to 13 weeks in total, to participate in the process in relation to planning applications. The exact calculation of the extended time period will depend on the date a planning application is submitted and the stage of the process it is at.

Following on from the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, published on 1 May last, it is envisaged that certain decision making processes under the planning system will shortly begin to be advanced. My Department is currently working with planning authorities in relation to the public access arrangements to be made to facilitate the public consultation aspects of the planning process, having regard to public health guidance and relevant

return to work protocols relating to the local government sector.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1366. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if guidance will be issued to local authorities on the need for streets and public areas in towns and villages to be thoroughly cleaned and sanitised by means of deep clean to help address the Covid-19 pandemic in view of the fact that local authorities and an association (details supplied) have requested guidance on this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6631/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): While I have responsibility for broad oversight of the local government system I have no function in relation to this specific matter.

I understand that local authorities will however, in delivering their public space and street hygiene and maintenance programmes, have due regard to the direction, guidance and advice from the Department of Health and the National Public Health Emergency Team for COVID-19 (NPHE) in the context of the ongoing consideration and management of any further public health measures.

Planning Issues

1367. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if a further order will be issued to extend time periods on all planning matters; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6637/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): On 29 March 2020, the Government, following my request and taking account of the considerations under section 251A(5) of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, made an Order under section 251A(3) of that Act which resulted in the extension of time for a range of specified or appropriate periods and timelines in the Planning Acts and associated planning regulations.

In determining the end date of the Order, a number of additional days were added beyond the end of the period of the Government's public health 'stay at home' announcement to facilitate the return to normal business by planning authorities and public communication of revised arrangements in advance of the expiry of the section 251A Order. In this context, the date of 20 April 2020 was specified in the Order as the date on which the period to be disregarded under section 251A(1) of the Planning Act was to end, comprising a period of 23 days.

Arising from the decision of the Government to extend the COVID-19 related measures restricting the movement of the public until 5 May 2020, the Government on 16 April 2020 made an Order under Section 251A(4) of the Planning Act further extending the duration of all relevant periods and timelines specified in planning legislation by an additional 19 days, up to and including 9 May 2020. As the Government has since decided to extend further the COVID-19 related restrictive measures until 18 May 2020, the Government has now made an additional Order under section 251A(4) of the Planning Act extending the duration of all relevant periods and timelines specified in planning legislation by an additional 14 days, up to and including 23 May 2020.

The three Orders have the combined effect of extending the relevant planning periods and timelines by an aggregate of 56 days/8 weeks. Notifications of these Orders, including reference to an updated FAQ document, have been issued in circular letters to all planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála. The updated FAQ document, relevant Circulars and the Government Orders, as well as additional information, are also available on my Department's main COVID-19/Planning webpage at:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/planning/covid-19-coronavirus/clarification-operation-planning-system-during-current-covid-19>

The planning system has a key role to play in the post COVID-19 recovery and as restrictions are unwound, I expect that the latest Order, which is effective until 23 May, will be the last such Order made under section 251A of the Planning and Development Act 2000.

Planning Issues

1368. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if amended strategic housing development applications which propose to increase the number of units in previously approved developments must submit subsequent applications to the relevant local authority or An Bord Pleanála, if the proposed increase in units falls below 100 (details supplied); and if it is policy for An Bord Pleanála to accept successive amendments to previously approved strategic housing development applications. [6638/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): As part of the Government's Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan on Housing and Homelessness, the Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act 2016 (the Act) introduced new streamlined arrangements to enable planning applications for strategic housing developments (SHDs) of 100 housing units or more, or student accommodation or shared accommodation developments of 200 bed spaces or more, to be made directly to An Bord Pleanála (the Board) for determination.

The Planning Code does not prohibit an applicant from submitting a subsequent application for a site which has already been granted planning permission. This subsequent application would be classed as a new application. Under section 4 of the Act, all applications that meet the SHD threshold criteria must be submitted to the Board for consideration.

Furthermore, under section 146B of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, the Board can also receive and decide upon proposals to amend permissions which have already been granted in respect of SHD proposals. This possibility was not availed of by the developers of the SHD in question. Instead, they decided to submit a new application proposing to add an additional 10 housing units to the permission that had already been previously granted.

Under section 30 of the Act, I am specifically precluded from exercising any power or control in relation to any particular case with which a planning authority or An Bord Pleanála is or may be concerned.

Social and Affordable Housing

1369. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government when local authorities will be provided with the affordable housing regulations regarding eligibility and other matters in view of the fact that some local authorities will soon be adver-

tising their affordable housing schemes to the public, for example, Dun Emer, Lusk, Fingal, County Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6640/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): In relation to the site referred to in Lusk, County Dublin, I can confirm that Fingal County Council has received approval in principle from my Department for Serviced Site Funding (SSF) of €1.5 million to assist its delivery of 39 affordable homes. The latest information from Fingal County Council indicates that a contractor has yet to be appointed to construct these homes and it anticipates that delivery of the first homes will begin in 2021.

Homes delivered under the SSF are subject to the provisions of Part 5 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, which was commenced in June 2018. This legislation now provides the statutory basis for the delivery of affordable housing for purchase in the State. Regulations in respect of the making of Schemes of Priority, advertising and application procedures were signed on 12 March 2019, and these were issued to local authorities on 22 March 2019. The purpose of a Scheme of Priority is to set out the affordable purchase arrangements at local authority level. This includes the methodology that will be applied by local authorities to determine the order of priority to be accorded to eligible households where the demand for such affordable dwellings exceeds the number available.

In line with the legal requirements of the Affordable Dwelling Purchase Arrangements, further regulations will be put in place including the form of charging orders, the length of the charged period and the minimum repayment that can be made during the charged period. When the operational procedures for the scheme are finalised, and before dwellings are made available for purchase under the scheme, a programme of communication will be undertaken by my Department and local authorities.

Local Authority Housing

1370. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the funding allocated to Cavan County Council in respect of the housing voids programme in 2019; if an increased level of funding will be provided in 2020 in view of the urgent need to bring vacant local authority housing stock back to habitable use; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6683/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The management and maintenance of local authority housing stock, including pre-letting repairs to vacant properties, the implementation of a planned maintenance programme and carrying out of responsive repairs, are matters for each individual local authority under Section 58 of the Housing Act 1966

Since 2014, Exchequer funding has also been provided through my Department's Voids Programme to support local authorities in preparing vacant units for re-letting. This funding was introduced originally to tackle long term vacant units and is now targeted to ensure minimal turnaround and re-let times for local authority vacant stock.

In 2019, Cavan County Council was allocated funding of €426,161 to undertake the refurbishment of 36 vacant social housing homes. My Department will be issuing a calls for proposals under the voids programme for 2020 and will consider any proposals received from Cavan County Council.

It should be noted that there is a commitment under Rebuilding Ireland that local authorities will introduce a preventative maintenance approach to the management of their housing stock

and it is logical that this would be funded primarily from the rental income received from that same housing stock. My Department is in ongoing discussions with the City & County Management Association, on behalf of local authorities, in this regard.

Question No. 1371 answered with Question No. 1309.

Land Development Agency

1372. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of the Land Development Agency; the number of staff employed by the agency; the grade of each; the annual cost of salaries; the number of consultants employed by the agency; the length of their contracts; the nature of the work; the cost of the contracts to date; the number of offices used by the agency; the location and annual lease cost of each; the number of development sites in which the agency has involvement including locations size, partners and numbers of residential units projected for each site; the projected cost of each development; the level of agency financing projected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6718/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The Land Development Agency (LDA) was established on an interim basis in September 2018, by way of an Establishment Order made under the Local Government Services (Corporate Bodies) Act 1971, pending the enactment of primary legislation when it will be established as a commercial State agency.

A General Scheme of the Land Development Agency Bill to establish the LDA as a commercial state body on a primary legislative basis was approved by Government for publication, consideration for pre-legislative scrutiny and priority drafting in July 2019. The pre legislative scrutiny process is now complete and the Committee's report was received by my Department in December 2019. This report will be considered in finalising the Bill, which it is intended will be brought to the Oireachtas in the coming months.

The day to day management of the LDA is matter for the LDA Chief Executive and his management team reporting to the LDA Interim Board. Under its Establishment Order, the LDA may appoint such and so many persons to be employees as it may determine. The LDA will report on its salary and consultancy costs in its annual financial statements in accordance with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies. In addition, as with all State bodies operating under the aegis of my Department, arrangements have been put in place by the LDA through which Oireachtas members can request information directly from the Agency in relation to operational matters - in this regard, the LDA may be contacted directly at oireachtas@lda.ie.

In order to be of assistance to the Deputy, on the basis of information provided by the LDA to my Department, I can indicate that the LDA currently has 17 staff, including 3 seconded from other State bodies. It is currently actively recruiting further staff and expects to have 45 employees by the end of the year, rising to 50 in 2021. It will have skilled staff in the areas of finance, investment appraisal, investment management, legal, procurement and property development (i.e. quantity surveyors, engineers, planners, architects etc) along with corporate and compliance support roles. The LDA does not operate a grading system. Contracts are agreed with employees following a competitive hiring process. The LDA is forecasting its annual salary costs to be approximately €3 million by 2021 for a staff complement of 50.

As with any other body responsible for developing large scale projects, the LDA requires professional and technical advisors and these services are tendered for in line with public pro-

curement processes. Public tenders vary in length and do not guarantee any award of services or expenditure until contracts are negotiated. Examples of professional services tendered to date by the LDA include Legal, Architect Lead Design, Project Management, HR, Procurement, Corporate Advisory, Communications.

To date professional fees incurred by the LDA on projects are predominantly planning and design fees and project management fees, according as the LDA conducts feasibility and design work on their portfolio of sites. The total costs incurred across sites is in the region of €1 million to date. Corporate professional fees, including procurement fees, communications, recruitment, IT and legal, of approximately €500,000 have also been incurred to date during the LDA's set up phase.

The LDA currently leases office space in Ashford House, Tara Street, Dublin 2. The annual rent is €248,000 (ex VAT) with an annual service charge of €40,000 (ex VAT). Limerick City and County Council made accommodation available to one agency employee based in Limerick for a period, for which no rent was paid by the LDA.

The LDA currently has access to an initial tranche of 9 sites across the country that have near term delivery potential for 3,600 new homes. Further details of the sites are set out in the following table.

It is also working in partnership with other local authorities around the country. It is running a design review of the Sandy Road Regeneration Project in Galway which has the potential for up to 1,000 homes. It is also working with Limerick City and County Council on a site near Colbert Station in Limerick, funding a masterplan of the site which consists of lands owned by the Council, CIE, the Department of Education and the HSE.

It is not possible to determine total delivery costs of the projects at this stage as the design work has not yet been completed. The LDA will establish appropriate funding mechanisms for each of its projects including proposed investment from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF) and other sources.

Update on LDA sites

Location	Size	Projected number of units	Status	Partners
Shanganagh, Dublin	17.8 acres	597 units, of which 200 social, 91 cost purchase, 306 cost rental	Part 10 application submitted to An Bord Pleanala in January 2020 with construction to follow subject to planning permission.	Site being developed in conjunction with Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council.
Central Mental Hospital, Dundrum	28 acres	1,200 units (estimated)	Pre-planning Design team appointed. LDA expects to lodge a planning application in mid-2021 and begin construction in early 2022	
Devoy Barracks, Naas	13.9 acres	210 units (estimated)	Pre-planning. Draft masterplan prepared	
St Kevin's Hospital, Cork	14.5 acres	274 units (estimated)	Pre-planning. Masterplan prepared	

Location	Size	Projected number of units	Status	Partners
Meath Hospital, Dublin 8	0.5 acres	104	Pre-planning. Design team to be appointed	
Hackettstown, Skerries	16.8 acres	340 units (estimated)	Pre planning. Design team appointed	
Castlelands, Balbriggan	60 acres	800 units (estimated)	Pre planning. Design team appointed	
Columb Barracks, Mullingar	24.7 acres	200 (estimated)	Pre-planning. Feasibility stage	
Dyke Road, Galway	4.5 acres	To be determined	Pre-planning Appraisal stage	

Housing Data

1373. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of NARPS residential properties funded by his Department; the length of the leases on these properties; the annual cost for each year the leases have been in place to date; the estimated net present value of the leases over the duration of the current leases; the AHBs and local authorities managing the properties and tenancies at the leases; the annual cost to date of property and tenancy management; the estimated net present value of property and tenancy management over the lifetime of the lease; and the understanding of his Department as to the position with the properties at the end of the lease term. [6719/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): In 2013, NAMA established a special purpose vehicle (National Asset Residential Property Services Limited ‘NARPS’), to take ownership of properties where there is an established demand for social housing and then lease them on a long-term basis to an approved housing body (AHB) or local authority. In these projects, NAMA funds the remediation of the common areas and the completion of the unfinished units, which are often the last remaining incomplete and vacant units in estates. When the units are complete, NARPS purchases the finished properties and leases them immediately to an AHB or local authority. Information in relation to the number of leases, broken down by AHB and local authority, is available on the NAMA website (updated to end-March 2020), at the following link:

<https://www.nama.ie/our-work/social-initiatives/social-housing>.

All NARPS leases are 20 years and 9 months in duration. The total cost of NARPS leases in 2019 was €11,116,511 and the total cost in 2018 was €12,126,909. Leasing costs prior to 2018 are available on a cumulative basis only and, as such, it is not possible to give a breakdown of the cost of NARPS leases before that date.

The ownership of the properties remains with NARPS at the expiration of the lease term. Following a direction by the Minister for Finance in 2019, NARPS will be retained in long term State ownership. NAMA will transfer NARPS to the State at the direction of the Minister for Finance and this comprises €300 million of the projected €4 billion surplus. This reflects the current value of the portfolio, based on lease income.

The tenancy and property management of the dwellings is a matter for the relevant local authority or Approved Housing Body.

1374. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he will introduce tougher sanctions for landlords who breach the legislation governing the private rented residential sector on multiple occasions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6721/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Dispute resolution is a key function of the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) under the Residential Tenancies Acts 2004-2019. Enforcement of RTB dispute determination orders has a firm legal base in those Acts. When landlords, tenants and third parties access the RTB dispute resolution service through mediation, adjudication or an appeal through a tenancy tribunal, they receive a legally binding determination order. Where non-compliance occurs, the RTB initially seeks to secure compliance by non-judicial means. Where non-compliance persists, the RTB will consider requests from injured parties to provide legal assistance to enforce the Order. The RTB has set out the policy and criteria it follows in this regard, which is available on its website at the following link:

https://onestopshop.rtb.ie/images/uploads/Dispute%20Order%20Enforcement/RTB_Policy_on_Enforcement_of_Determination_Orders.pdf.

Alternatively, an injured party may wish to take their own enforcement proceedings directly to the courts. A Guide to Enforcement in the District Court is also available on the RTB’s website at the following link:

https://onestopshop.rtb.ie/images/uploads/general/RTB_Guide_to_taking_Enforcement_Proceedings_A5_FINAL_VERSION.pdf.

Enforcement proceedings may involve the registration of the judgment of the Court and these judgments may then be published in the various Trade Gazettes, etc. The RTB website also displays the details of persons against whom it obtains court orders for any non-compliance with its determination orders.

If a party fails to comply with a Court order, the RTB may in certain circumstances seek further orders from the Court such as execution orders to engage the local sheriff to seize goods, orders for attachment on earnings and, in extreme circumstances, orders from the Court for attachment and committal.

The RTB has no power to prevent any non-compliant party from continuing to rent properties. However, RTB Adjudicators and Tribunal members can award damages against a party for breaches of their obligations under the Residential Tenancies Acts. These damages, which are awarded to the other party, can be up to €20,000 depending on the severity of the offence.

A person guilty of an offence under the Residential Tenancies Acts 2004-2019 is liable, in accordance with section 9 of the 2004 Act, on summary conviction to a Class B fine (currently up to a maximum of €4,000 under the Fines Act 2010) or imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or both. If the contravention in respect of which a person is convicted of an offence under those Acts continues after the conviction, the person is guilty of a further offence on every day on which the contravention continues and for each such offence the person shall be liable on summary conviction to a Class E fine (currently up to a maximum of €500 under the Fines Act 2010).

The Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019 empowers the RTB to investigate improper conduct by landlords and impose sanctions under a new Part 7A – Complaints, Investigations and Sanctions – inserted into the Residential Tenancies Act 2004. In particular, unlawful rent increases in RPZs, unlawful tenancy terminations and non-registration of tenancies can

be investigated by the RTB with the imposition of a possible sanction of up to €30,000.

Section 148AD of the Residential Tenancies Acts 2004-2019 sets out the matters to be considered by the RTB in deciding on any sanction to be imposed. These matters include:

- the need for any sanction to be appropriate and proportionate; sufficient to deter the recurrence of any similar improper conduct; and in the public interest to encourage compliance with the Act;
- the seriousness, duration and any re-occurrence of the improper conduct;
- any continuation of the improper conduct after the landlord was notified of the investigation concerned; and
- whether a sanction has previously been imposed on foot of a similar occurrence of improper conduct.

I do not consider it necessary to further strengthen the RTB's sanctioning powers at this stage but I will continue to keep the matter under review.

Home Loan Scheme

1375. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government when a Rebuilding Ireland home loan will issue for a person (details provided) in County Dublin; if he will provide details of the process for handling such live applications during the Covid-19 period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6766/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Section 63(3) of the Local Government Act 2001 provides that, subject to law, a local authority is independent in the performance of its functions. In addition, Section 6 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 specifically provides that the Minister's power to issue policy directions and guidelines to housing authorities in relation to their housing functions should not be construed as enabling the Minister to exercise any power or control in relation to any individual case with which a housing authority is or may be concerned.

Accordingly, I, as Minister, am precluded from intervening in relation to individual loan applications. The final decision on loan approval is a matter for each local authority and its Credit Committee on a case-by-case basis. Decisions on all housing loan applications must be made in accordance with the statutory credit policy that underpins the scheme, in order to ensure prudence and consistency of treatment for all applicants.

Loan applicants who are dissatisfied with a loan application decision of a local authority Credit Committee may appeal that decision to the local authority. Details of the appeals process can be obtained from the relevant local authority.

It is recognised that current applicants for a Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan may be experiencing difficulties arising out of COVID-19. Local authorities are being asked to show flexibility when dealing with applicants at all stages of the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan process from application and approval, to drawdown and appeal and should extend the time periods as necessary to accommodate those who may be experiencing difficulties arising out of COVID-19 restrictions.

Nevertheless, local authorities are also required to be prudent with their lending, both for the protection of the lender and the borrower, and ensure that mortgages are only advanced based

on up to date financial and employment data from applicants, as appropriate, having regard to the implications that COVID-19 has had for many businesses and employers. In such cases, a decision on whether to withdraw or vary a loan offer is a decision for each local authority.

Loan offer and conditionality are ultimately a contractual matter between the borrower and the local authority. As such, borrowers may wish to consult with their solicitor who can advise further on contractual matters.

Housing Estates

1376. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of applications from Kildare County Council for funding to complete housing estates (details supplied) with developer provided infrastructure; when he expects to make a decision on this funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6795/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): In July 2019, my Department launched the multi-annual Developer-Provided Water Services Infrastructure Resolution Programme 2019-2021. Bids were sought from local authorities for funding under the programme and nineteen local authorities with Developer-Provided Water Services Infrastructure in estates in their areas made applications for funding. Kildare County Council included the estate referred to in its application.

My Department has completed a preliminary evaluation and clarification process on the bids received from the local authorities. An Expert Panel, which includes Departmental, stakeholder and independent representation, has been appointed to examine the bids. The Panel has held a number of meetings already, with a further meeting scheduled for later this month.

The Expert Panel will make recommendations on the suitability of projects for funding under the programme. This will be based on criteria set out in the Framework document issued to local authorities when requesting proposals. It is expected that an announcement on approvals and allocations will be made once that process is concluded in late Q2 2020.

Questions Nos. 1377 and 1378 answered with Question No. 1304.

Question No. 1379 answered with Question No. 1355.

Question No. 1380 answered with Question No. 1339.

Local Authority Housing

1381. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the capital funding provided to each local authority to build social and affordable housing on public land in each of the years 2014 to 2019, in tabular form; the estimate for 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6882/20]

1382. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of social and affordable houses constructed by each local authority in each of the years 2014 to 2019; the estimate for 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6883/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1381 and 1382 together.

Social housing construction is funded under a range of different initiatives such as local authority construction, turnkey developments, rapid delivery and regeneration programmes and through direct construction and turnkey developments by approved housing bodies. Since the commencement of Rebuilding Ireland in 2016, almost €2.4 billion has been invested in social housing construction alone, in addition to the very substantial investment that has taken place in other forms of social housing delivery, including acquisitions, the Housing Assistance Payment and the Rental Accommodation Scheme. The major investment in social housing will continue this year, with the highest level of funding ever invested in housing in a single year, at €2.63 billion, supporting the delivery of a broad range of housing programmes, including the delivery of over 11,100 new social housing homes through build, acquisition and leasing programmes, over 7,700 of which will be delivered through construction mechanisms.

Social housing construction expenditure by local authority in each year 2016 to 2019 is set out in the following table. Prior to the implementation of Rebuilding Ireland in 2016, the reporting of local authority expenditure was primarily on a programme basis; however, if the Deputy is concerned about a specific local authority's expenditure pre-2016, I will have the matter explored further on receipt of the relevant information. It is not possible to disaggregate expenditure into that expended specifically on public land.

In relation to affordability issues, the objective of the Serviced Sites Fund (SSF) is to provide for key enabling infrastructure requirements that will help unlock publicly-owned lands specifically for affordable homes to buy or rent. €310 million is to be made available under the SSF, comprising an Exchequer contribution of €275 million, plus €35 million contribution from local authorities. A maximum amount of SSF funding of €50,000 is available per affordable home. On this basis, at least 6,200 affordable homes can be facilitated. To date, €127 million has been allocated in SSF funding for infrastructure that will facilitate the development of approximately 3,200 homes that will be made available across 35 developments in 14 local authorities.

Details of all SSF funded infrastructure projects are available on the Rebuilding Ireland website at the following links:

<https://rebuildingireland.ie/news/minister-murphy-approves-10-local-authority-sites-affordable-housing-serviced-sites-fund/>

<https://rebuildingireland.ie/news/minister-murphy-approves-funding-of-e84m-to-support-delivery-of-1770-affordable-homes-under-the-ssf/>

Additionally, as an initiative under Rebuilding Ireland, the Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund (LIHAF) is primarily designed to fund the provision of public off-site infrastructure to relieve critical infrastructure blockages and enable housing developments to be built on key sites at scale. This will activate the delivery of almost 20,000 new homes across public and private sites, within which 3,274 are to be Part V/social housing homes, 2,100 affordable homes and 5,686 cost reduced homes are due to be provided.

30 projects received final LIHAF approval with an overall budget of €195.7 million, of which €146.8 million will be Exchequer funded, with the remainder funded via local authorities. Details of the approvals by local authority area, budget allocation, project description and projected housing delivery are available at www.rebuildingireland.ie/LIHAF.

In terms of LIHAF funding drawdown, thus far, most infrastructure projects have been at the design, planning and procurement stages, and the bulk of expenditure will arise during the construction phase. This is reflected in the level of expenditure to end Q1 2020, with approximately €37.731 million in Exchequer funds drawn down (matched by a further 25% local

authority funding, bringing the total expenditure to €50.308 million). Drawdown of LIHAF grant funding from my Department commenced with €1.604m in Exchequer funding provided in 2017, a further €6.815 million in 2018, €22.244 million in 2019 and approximately €7.068 million to end Q1 2020.

	2016	2017	2018	2019
Local Authority	Build Expenditure	Build Expenditure	Build Expenditure	Build Expenditure
	€m	€m	€m	€m
Carlow	2.87	5.25	6.03	14.71
Cavan	1.19	1.16	3.02	4.22
Clare	1.55	3.20	3.67	11.98
Cork City	26.78	13.92	42.31	55.43
Cork County	6.66	16.67	53.99	65.54
Donegal	1.36	4.28	10.36	9.86
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown	5.56	26.90	25.89	10.20
Dublin City	58.32	85.37	152.97	100.80
Fingal	6.51	31.47	61.06	58.59
Galway City	0.38	4.65	11.23	21.96
Galway County	1.27	1.88	12.33	15.95
Kerry	2.71	6.90	19.96	22.32
Kildare	1.63	11.33	27.83	59.18
Kilkenny	2.13	5.60	18.72	12.66
Laois	0.86	3.28	1.87	6.06
Leitrim	0.75	0.14	1.46	3.21
Limerick	22.91	46.00	50.21	40.20
Longford	0.51	2.97	9.40	15.56
Louth	1.90	4.67	12.57	28.01
Mayo	1.97	2.60	6.62	19.38
Meath	6.41	10.34	38.58	42.68
Monaghan	0.83	8.72	8.64	12.32
Offaly	0.85	0.40	3.42	12.82
Roscommon	0.82	1.98	1.62	4.06
Sligo	2.83	4.47	10.10	12.76
South Dublin	5.66	19.31	67.53	52.51
Tipperary	1.61	2.17	4.27	13.57
Waterford	2.38	2.65	29.39	27.41
Westmeath	0.72	1.05	6.37	10.28
Wexford	2.23	4.11	15.63	21.79
Wicklow	0.25	0.73	24.19	42.91

In 2019, local authorities, working in partnership with Approved Housing Bodies, delivered more than 10,000 (10,007) new social homes nationwide utilising the mechanisms of Build (6,074), Acquisition (2,772) and Leasing (1,161).

Families and individuals in the private rented sector were also supported through the Housing Assistance Payment and schemes such as the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS). Just

over 17,000 households (17,025) were supported by HAP in 2019 and 1,043 under RAS. Overall, over 28,000 (28,075) households were supported through the range of social housing programmes in 2019, exceeding the ambitious target for the year.

A full detailed breakdown of social housing delivery by local authority area is available on my Department's website at the following link: www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordable/overall-social-housing-provision. In addition, the Q4 2019 Social Housing Construction Status Report, which contains scheme by scheme information on the progress of over 26,000 new social housing homes either approved (and progressing through planning, design and construction) or completed, is also available on the Rebuilding Ireland website at the following link:

<https://rebuildingireland.ie/news/minister-murphy-publishes-social-housing-construction-status-report-for-q4-2019-2/>

Housing Assistance Payment

1383. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the additional resources or leeway being given to private renters who are in receipt of HAP but who temporarily do not meet the criteria for same in regard to the percentage of their total income paid on rental costs. [6894/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): To qualify for HAP, a household must be qualified for social housing support by their local authority, which means the household must qualify to go on the local authority housing waiting list. HAP tenants find their own accommodation in the private rented market and are advised that this accommodation should be within the HAP rent limits provided to them by the local authority. The limits applicable are related to the specific household and the rental market in the area. As HAP also allows for tenants to work full-time and retain their housing support, in many cases people may make choices about affordability taking this into consideration.

My Department is aware that some HAP recipients are making payments directly to their landlords, beyond the amount of HAP being paid on their behalf. There is no legislative provision precluding HAP supported households contributing towards the monthly rent to their landlord beyond that of their HAP payment. However, decisions in relation to HAP, including the suitability of HAP accommodation, is solely a matter for the local authority concerned and local authorities have a responsibility to ensure that tenancies are sustainable and are advised not to provide HAP support to tenancies where the household would not be in a position to meet the rental costs being sought.

Local authorities have discretion, because of local rental market conditions, to exceed the maximum rent limit by up to 20%, or up to 50% in the Dublin region for those households either in, or at immediate risk of, homelessness. The additional discretion available to homeless households recognises the difficulty this cohort of households faces in sourcing and securing properties in a highly competitive rental market. It should be noted that it is a matter for the local authority to determine if the application of the flexibility is warranted on a case by case basis and also the level of additional discretion applied in each case.

HAP tenants are required to sign a rent contribution agreement to pay a weekly rental contribution to the relevant local authority, in line with the local authority's differential rent scheme. As set out in the rent contribution agreement, this weekly rental contribution must be paid by them so that they remain eligible for the HAP scheme.

Under the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (COVID-19) Act 2020, the Government introduced additional supports and protections for renters, beyond the income supports already agreed with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. The Act provides for amendments to the Residential Tenancies Acts 2004 to 2019, which will operate for a period of 3 months from 27 March 2020. Provision has also been made for this period to be extended, if the Government considers it appropriate to do so.

A notice of termination cannot be served during the COVID-19 emergency period. All notices of termination which were served before the emergency period are paused and tenants, in general, cannot be obliged to leave their rented accommodation during this time. Similarly, all notices of rent increase which were served before the emergency period and were due to take effect during this period, are paused. While tenants are obliged to pay rent during the COVID-19 emergency period, landlords are not permitted to increase the amount of rent payable during this period.

Where HAP tenants are not financially impacted by the COVID-19 measures, they are expected to continue to pay their HAP differential rent. However, if tenants' circumstances change, the local authority should reassess those tenants and adjust their differential rent accordingly.

Local authorities have been requested to ensure that HAP tenants newly in receipt of Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) supports be facilitated in remaining in their HAP tenancies. If amendments cannot be made immediately to a tenant's differential rent amount, any arrears accumulating from the date of approval of the new DEASP support should be rectified at a later date. This will not affect the HAP payment to the landlord.

My Department continues to keep the operation of the HAP scheme under review and it is considered to be a key vehicle in meeting housing need and fulfilling the ambitious programme outlined under Rebuilding Ireland.

Housing Adaptation Grant

1384. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the level of funding provided to Westmeath and Longford county councils for the housing adaptation grant and grant for older persons in the past four years. [6895/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): My Department provides funding to local authorities for the suite of Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability in respect of private houses, with funding of €73.75 million being made available for 2020.

Information for the years 2016-2018, showing the numbers of grants funded and the amounts provided to Westmeath and Longford County Councils, is available on my Department's website at the following link:

<http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/statistics/social-and-affordable/other-local-authority-housing-scheme-statistics>.

The following table contains details of the 2019 exchequer funding drawn down by both Councils for the grants up to 31 December 2019. The amounts shown for exchequer drawdown are topped up by each local authority's own 20% contribution.

Local Authority	Exchequer Drawdown to 31 December 2019
Longford	€575,984
Westmeath	€1,043,669

Rent Supplement Scheme Administration

1385. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if it is compulsory for rent supplement recipients to transfer to the housing assistance payment. [6963/20]

1386. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if a rent supplement recipient is told that they must transfer to housing assistance payment but the landlord refuses to move to this system, if the tenant can remain on rent allowance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6964/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1385 and 1386 together.

The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) is a form of social housing support for people who have a long-term housing need. It is available in all local authority areas and its introduction ensures that all social housing supports can be accessed through the local authorities.

HAP will replace Rent Supplement (RS) for those with a long-term housing need who qualify for social housing support. However, RS will remain available through the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) to households as a short-term income support.

HAP provides fast, flexible housing support to all eligible households in the area of their choice. Individuals, who in the past were reluctant to avail of full time work as they would lose their Rent Supplement support, can now move to HAP and avail of full-time employment and retain their housing support, with an adjustment in their differential rent.

HAP plays a vital role in housing eligible families and individuals. At the end of Q4 2019 there were more than 52,000 households having their housing needs met via HAP.

A landlord or an agent acting on behalf of a landlord is not legally obliged to enter into a tenancy agreement specifically with a HAP recipient. However, on 1 January 2016, the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2015 introduced “housing assistance” as a new discriminatory ground. This means that discrimination in the provision of accommodation or related service and amenities against people in receipt of rent supplement, HAP or other social welfare payments is prohibited. Further information is available at

<https://www.ihrec.ie/your-rights/i-have-an-issue-with-a-service/i-have-an-issue-about-accommodation/>

If a person feels that they have been discriminated against by a landlord or their agent, they can make a complaint under the Equal Status Acts to the Workplace Relations Commission; further information is available on the Commission’s website, *<https://www.workplacerelations.ie>*

Administration of the HAP scheme is a matter for the relevant local authority. The transfer of existing long-term rent supplement tenancies is continuing, with ongoing engagement between local authorities and local DEASP offices. Failure of a landlord to participate in HAP should not affect an existing customer’s entitlement to rent supplement, provided that the tenant has

engaged with the local authority and/or Community Welfare Officer within the HAP transfer process.

Question No. 1387 answered with Question No. 1309.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1388. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if the co-living policy has been reviewed in view of the new Covid-19 public health guidelines on social distancing and self-isolation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6969/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): In 2018, I published updated Sustainable Urban Housing: Design Standards for New Apartments Guidelines for Planning Authorities, as Ministerial Guidance under Section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended), following an extensive public consultation process.

The updated guidelines set out policy in relation to a range of apartment formats needed to meet the accommodation needs of different household types and sizes. This includes the potential for a ‘Shared Accommodation’ or ‘Co-Living’ format. This format comprises professionally managed rental accommodation, where living accommodation, that may comprise individual rooms, is rented within an overall development, that must also include access to shared or communal facilities and amenities, but not shared bathroom or toilet facilities. To end Q1 2020, 294 co-living bedspaces have been approved, by An Bord Pleanála under the strategic housing development application process, for development since the guidelines came in to force in 2018. In comparison, there were more than 60,000 homes permitted, none of which were co-living bedspaces, since the guidelines were published to the end of 2019 alone.

Shared accommodation is one of a number of residential settings that include hotels, hostels, residential institutions and student accommodation, where residential occupation comprises more than one household. Although such accommodation formats are not as prevalent as individual houses or apartments, they nonetheless play an important role in catering for the diverse needs of the overall population. There are currently no plans to review any of these formats in light of the COVID-19 pandemic but my Department will continue to monitor existing policy measures and activities, having regard to the most up to date Government public health advice and guidance, as the response to the COVID-19 pandemic evolves.

Rental Sector

1389. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government when he plans to regulate online platforms that provide short-term lets; the goal of the proposed regulations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6970/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The primary objective of the legislative changes introduced last year in relation to the regulation of short-term letting sector through the planning code is to help address its impact on the supply of private rented accommodation, particularly in urban centres of high housing demand i.e. rent pressure zones. The planning system facilitates the regulation of such short-term letting uses undertaken by the individual carrying out the activity, i.e. the owner/occupier of the house or apartment, rather than the online platforms.

Under the Short-Term Letting legislation applicable in rent pressure zones:

- Short term letting is defined as the letting of a house or apartment, or part of a house or apartment, for any period not exceeding 14 days.

- Homesharing (the letting of a room or rooms in a person's principal private residence) continues to be permissible on an unrestricted basis and is exempted from the new planning requirements.

- Homesharers are allowed to sub-let their entire principle private residence (house or apartment) on a short term basis for a cumulative period of 90 days where they are temporarily absent from their home.

- Where the 90 day threshold is exceeded, change of use planning permission is required.

If a person homeshares their principal private residence in a rent pressure zone and wishes to avail of the new planning exemptions, they need to register this with their local planning authority and fulfil specified reporting obligations.

However, where a person owns a property in a rent pressure zone which is not their principal private residence and intends to let it for short term letting purposes, s/he is required to apply for a change of use planning permission unless the property already has a specific planning permission to be used for tourism or short-term letting purposes.

The broader regulation of tourism activity, including the possible development of a new regulatory or licensing/registration system for commercial platforms and short-term letting agents - which was recommended in the final Working Group report on the regulation of short-term lettings - is beyond the scope of the planning code and my remit. However, I have previously written to my colleague, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, outlining the recommendations made by the Working Group and highlighting the measures taken by my Department to act upon these recommendations, specifically the introduction of the short-term letting legislation. I advised the Minister that the remaining recommendations of the Working Group fell under the remit of his Department to action, and assured him of my support, and that of my Department, in addressing these outstanding recommendations.

The extent of former short-term rental stock which has become available during the COVID-19 Emergency has highlighted the need for a more sustainable regulatory regime for this form of accommodation, which meets the needs of both the tourism and housing sectors. It will be a matter for the incoming Government, and particularly the incoming Minister with responsibility for the tourism sector, to decide on any further actions it may wish to take in relation to the possible regulation of online platforms.

As part of the immediate response to COVID-19, a number of properties formerly available as short-term lets were secured by local authorities to provide accommodation for households experiencing homelessness. The level of enquiries to local authorities indicates that there are considerable numbers of properties which have been previously rented as tourist accommodation. Local authorities are engaging with property owners in relation to the use of such properties for longer-term social housing, including long-term leasing. Given the number of households on the social housing waiting list, including the number of households in homeless emergency accommodation, it is important that as many of these properties as possible are converted from tourist accommodation to homes. My Department will be continuing to work with the local authorities to support this work in the coming weeks and months.

Question No. 1390 answered with Question No. 1341.

Question No. 1391 answered with Question No. 1364.

Approved Housing Bodies

1392. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the action he is taking to assist the reclassification of approved housing bodies as off-balance sheet; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6992/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): In April 2018 the Department of Finance published the Stability Programme Update for 2018 which was the first set of fiscal projections produced by that Department to incorporate the CSO decision to reclassify the majority of Tier 3 Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) as part of the local government sector. This was an important first step in the Government’s assessment as to the impact of the Eurostat decision. The Department of Finance undertook an analysis of the implications for General Government Expenditure and General Government Debt and concluded that there are no direct Exchequer implications and the projections do not present any particular issue in the context of the fiscal rules.

In addition, my Department has been engaging with AHB sector representative bodies (namely, the Irish Council for Social Housing and the Housing Alliance) and examining, in detail, proposals, including proposals which were presented by those bodies, as a possible means to achieve reclassification. The proposals are complex as they cut across a wide range of social housing policy issues and require extensive analysis.

An important part of this exercise is to examine the feasibility of measures which can be taken to develop the AHB sector in such a way so that it could be reclassified as being ‘off-balance sheet’, without undermining the foundations of social housing policy. In this context, it must be accepted that this will more likely be a more longer term objective.

Constructive discussions have taken place with AHB representative bodies on a number of occasions and are informing a pathway for dealing with the issues involved. It was agreed that a working group would be established to consider these issues further.

Although that group has not yet had the opportunity to formally meet, work is continuing on this matter and my Department continues to engage with all stakeholders and to liaise with the Department of Finance and the Central Statistics Office to ensure any new or additional information can be brought forward for consideration.

Notwithstanding the decision by Eurostat, the Government continues to see a central role for the voluntary housing sector in contributing to the delivery of social housing under Rebuilding Ireland. It is committed to using all mechanisms and schemes, including through the AHB sector, to ensure that we maintain the momentum towards meeting the ambitious 50,000 social housing target under the Action Plan. I have communicated to both the local authorities and the AHB sector that this statistical classification will not affect ambitious plans under Rebuilding Ireland.

Rental Sector

1393. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans to introduce a national affordable rental scheme to facilitate the roll-out of cost rental housing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6993/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy):

Acknowledging that renters in Dublin and other major urban centres are facing significant housing access and affordability challenges, the Government is committed to the establishment of a cost rental sector in Ireland. Cost rental is housing which does not include a profit margin and therefore rents can be set at a level that only needs to cover the cost of delivering, managing, and maintaining the homes.

I have established a working group involving my Department, the Land Development Agency (LDA), the Housing Agency and other expert bodies, which is developing a policy framework for the cost rental model and examining how a sustainable financing structure can be established to commence delivery of homes at the scale required to get this new category of housing established. Detailed operational and eligibility criteria for cost rental will be informed by this evidence building and policy work. The work of this group will also be assisted by research and other support that is being undertaken by the European Investment Bank (EIB) on behalf of my Department, drawing on the EIB's extensive international experience in this area.

My Department's work on cost rental is also being supported by two pilot projects, at the former St. Michael's Estate in Inchicore and at Enniskerry Road in Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown. The latter of these has already commenced construction, supported by EIB funding, and the first homes are anticipated to come on stream from 2021. Additionally, the LDA and some local authorities are actively considering cost rental as an option for sites within their land portfolios. An example of this can be seen in the planning application which has been submitted for lands in Shanganagh in Dun Laoghaire Rathdown, where the LDA will work in partnership with the County Council to deliver over 350 cost rental homes.

The selection of further sites for cost rental consideration will be informed by emerging policy and by the financial and operational model that will be developed from the work outlined above.

Land Development Agency

1394. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the measures in place to ensure transparency in the actions of the Land Development Agency;; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6995/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy):

The Land Development Agency (LDA) is currently established as a State body under secondary legislation pending its establishment as a commercial State agency under legislation which it is hoped will be enacted later this year.

In line with all commercial and non-commercial State bodies, the LDA is required to comply with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies, which is based on the underlying principles of good governance including accountability and transparency. The Code provides guidelines for both parent Departments and State bodies to ensure appropriate governance procedures are followed and contains provisions in relation to oversight, as well as financial reporting arrangements and establishment of committees, including in relation to audit and risk. The LDA is also subject to the requirements of the Public Spending Code.

In line with its establishment order, the LDA is currently governed by an interim Board. On enactment of the legislation expected later this year, a Board for the LDA will be appointed in accordance with the Guidelines on the Appointment to State Boards. The Board provides ongoing strategic direction and oversight in regard to the LDA's activities and ensures that it

complies with all corporate governance and transparency provisions. The Board is also responsible for the completion of an Annual Report each year on the activities of the Agency and the report for 2019 will be published in the coming months.

In line with the Code of Practice, the LDA and my Department meet on a regular basis to ensure that my Department is updated on the work of the Agency and to discuss other relevant issues. There is currently a Memorandum of Understanding in place between my Department and the LDA to cover the interim period until the primary legislation is enacted. Following this, the LDA will be subject to the usual Departmental oversight arrangements for Commercial State Agencies as set out under the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies.

In addition, my Department has engaged with NewERA to provide financial and commercial advice in relation to the operations of the LDA. Furthermore, the legislation will provide that the LDA will be subject to annual audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General, with such audits being examinable by the Public Accounts Committee.

It should also be noted that the LDA, as a public body, is subject to the Freedom of Information (FOI) Acts.

House Prices

1395. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if an analysis of the differences in housing construction costs between homes delivered under a fixed price development agreement and homes delivered under public works contracts is being undertaken; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6996/20]

1396. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the constraints to fixed price development agreements being used for the construction of homes on publicly owned land; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6989/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1395 and 1396 together.

Sites on which public housing is being developed are, in the main, owned by local authorities and, consistent with the Public Spending Code, it is a matter for them as Sponsoring Agencies for such public investment projects to analyse the delivery options. Any option proposed by a local authority for the delivery of public housing, whether based on a public works contract or development agreement, must comply with the Public Spending Code, particularly in terms of obtaining the best possible value for money.

The majority of local authority public housing projects continue to be developed using public works contracts and while development agreements have been little used to date, I am aware of their intended use by Dublin City Council in relation to the O’Devaney Gardens project and their proposed use in relation to the Oscar Traynor Road site. Depending on the decisions and approaches followed by local authorities, development agreements may be suitable for large-scale, mixed-tenure developments. But irrespective of the approach used, it remains the case under the Public Spending Code that local authorities conduct a financial and economic appraisal, which is submitted to my Department as the Approving Authority under the Code.

Question No. 1397 answered with Question No. 1364.

Departmental Contracts

1398. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the amount spent on external consultants by his Department in 2019; the average hourly rate; if caps or limits on such spending are in place; the way in which conflicts of interest are managed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7284/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The expenditure by my Department in 2019 on external consultants was some €1.2 million. Information on an average hourly rate is not readily available in respect of the range of projects concerned and its compilation would involve a disproportionate amount of time and work.

Consultancy service providers are only engaged by the Department where specific expertise is required which is not available in the organisation at the relevant time. In availing of such services, every effort is made to ensure maximum value for money and the keeping of expenditure to the minimum necessary to achieve the relevant objectives. Conflicts of interest are managed in accordance with specific provisions in the terms and conditions which are included in the relevant public procurement request for tender documentation.

Commemorative Events

1399. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if the National Famine Commemoration Day will be brought into the remit of her Department in addition to the other national days of remembrance that have fixed dates in the State calendar; and if the National Famine Commemoration Day will be given a fixed day in the State calendar for commemoration. [5930/20]

1404. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the reason the National Famine Commemoration Day is being marked on the fourth Sunday of May for 2020, when the third Sunday in May is formally designated as the National Famine Commemoration Day. [6165/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1399 and 1404 together.

As I have previously informed the House in May 2018 and in my reply to Parliamentary Question No 3025 of 23 July 2019 and Parliamentary Question No 2584 of 24 July 2018, the Government, on 1st May 2018 approved the designation of the third Sunday of May each year as the National Famine Commemoration Day, with the arrangements for the holding of the State commemoration on this day or the preceding Saturday to be decided each year following consultation with the relevant local authority and host community

With regard to this year’s Commemoration, I was pleased to represent the Government at a formal wreath laying ceremony in St. Stephen’s Green on Sunday 17th May. The ceremony was conducted in accordance with the current COVID-19 guidelines and was not open to the public.

The work of the National Famine Commemoration Committee, including the organisation of the annual commemoration, has come within the remit of my Department since 2011.

The National Famine Commemoration 2021 is due to take place in Buncrana Co. Donegal next May.

1400. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the steps she will take to assist the parents of children in a school (details supplied) to recover the deposit and fees they paid for a course in a college which is not going ahead. [6368/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Seán Kyne): The Deputy will be aware that on foot of consultation with health authorities and in the overall interests of protecting public health, having regard to the emergency measures being taken due to Covid-19, my Department announced that no Irish language courses will be run in the Gaeltacht this summer

It is recognised that this is an unprecedented, uncertain and challenging period and that this decision represents a significant setback to Gaeltacht regions and to the many thousands of students who had looked forward to attending courses over the summer. However, the health of our communities remains the priority for Government at this time.

Under Scéim na bhFoghlaimoirí Gaeilge, the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht provides a subsidy to Gaeltacht households who provide accommodation for students attending Irish language summer colleges in the Gaeltacht. The households also received payment from the colleges.

These colleges are recognised as a vital part of the social and economic infrastructure of the Gaeltacht with up to 27,000 students attending over 40 colleges and staying with one of the 700 Gaeltacht families registered to provide accommodation. The sector is estimated to generate c. €50m of economic activity for Gaeltacht areas, given its wider impact on hotels, B&Bs, restaurants and public houses when parents visit their children.

Since the onset of the pandemic, both I and my officials have met on a number of occasions with the colleges' representative organisation, CONCOS, with a view to identifying the financial pressure points for the sector in order to ensure the survival of this important sector for the Irish language and the Gaeltacht and the cultural life of the country as a whole. While the question of repayment of deposits to those who have reserved places on courses scheduled for summer 2020 is primarily one for the colleges concerned, the matter is being actively considered as part of this process.

Departmental Contracts

1401. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if her Department has engaged the use of external consultants from 1 January 2020 to date; the details and costs of such engagements; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5526/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I am advised that no external consultants have been engaged by my Department for the period under review. My Department commissions engineering, environmental and other experts from time to time to provide technical reports or advice on specific issues. While the providers of these services are consultant engineers, environmental consultants etc., or may describe themselves in other such terms, their work is not classified as consultancy services and is not funded from my Department's Administrative Budget.

Turf Cutting Compensation Scheme

1402. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

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when a person (details supplied) will be paid the cessation payment for their bog in County Roscommon; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [5704/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): An application under the cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme had been received from the individual referred to in the Deputy's Question.

Annual payments for 2020 (€1,554 to each qualifying applicant) under the cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme to qualifying applicants are being made. My Department expects this process to be completed by the end of the third quarter of 2020.

Scéimeanna Tacaíochta

1403. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Aire Cultúir, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta cén dáta ar a gcuirfear sonraí ar fáil maidir leis na scéimeanna tacaíochta a d'fhógair Aire Stáit na Gaeltachta an 22 Aibreán 2020 chun teacht i gcabhair ar na coláistí samhraidh Gaeltachta agus ar na mná tí a chuireann lóistín ar fáil; an n-aontaíonn sí go bhfuil práinn faoi leith ag baint le cinnteacht a chur ar fáil do na coláistí samhraidh agus do na mná tí nuair a chuirtear san áireamh go bhfuil todhchaí na gcoláistí céanna i mbaol maidir le samhradh 2021, go háirithe agus na coláistí samhraidh ag aisíoc na n-éarlaisí faoi láthair a fuair siad ó thuismitheoirí le haghaidh na bliana 2020; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [5747/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Seán Kyne): Dírim aird an Teachta ar na ceisteanna atá freagartha agam cheana féin faoin ábhar seo. Mar atá ráite agam cheana féin, tar éis dul i gcomhairle leis na húdaráis sláinte agus ar mhaithe le sláinte phoiblí a chosaint, ag cur san áireamh na bearta éigeandála atá á nglacadh maidir le Covid-19, d'fhógair mo Roinn le gairid nach reáchtálfar aon chúrsa foghlama Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht an samhradh seo de bharr na paindéime Covid-19.

Aithnítear gur cuid lárnach de bhonneagar sóisialta agus geilleagrach na Gaeltachta iad na coláistí agus suas le 27,000 scoláire go bliantúil ag freastal ar cheann de 42 coláiste agus iad ag fanacht le ceann den 700 teaghlach Gaeltachta atá incháilithe faoi Scéim na bhfoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge de chuid na Roinne le lóistín a chur ar fáil. Meastar gur fiú c.€50m sa bhliain í earnáil na gcoláistí Gaeilge do gheilleagar na Gaeltachta nuair a chuirtear san áireamh na hóstáin, tithe aíochta, bialann agus gnólachtaí a dtugann tuismitheoirí na bhfoghlaimeoirí cuairt orthu i gcaitheamh an tsamhraidh.

Mar atá luaite agam roimhe seo, tá cíoradh á dhéanamh i rith an ama ag an Roinn ar an mbealach is fearr is féidir chun earnáil na gcoláistí Gaeilge a chobhsú. Chuige sin, tá mé féin agus oifigigh mo Roinne i dteagmháil i rith an ama le scáthghrúpa na gcoláistí samhraidh, CONCOS.

Is i gcomhar le páirtithe leasmhara atá an obair seo idir lámha i dtreo féachaint chuige go mbeidh teacht aniar ann don earnáil trí chéile in 2021 agus sna blianta ina dhiaidh sin.

Question No. 1404 answered with Question No. 1399.

Wildlife Protection

1405. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the

Gaeltacht if her attention has been drawn to a matter (details supplied); if there is a dedicated investigation unit for the poisoning of birds of prey; the number of prosecutions for illegal bird poisoning since 2017; and the measures being taken to police banned pesticides here. [6174/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Under the Wildlife Acts and under the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 all bird species are protected and animals such as badgers, deer, otters, bats and hares are also protected.

Officials of the National Parks and Wildlife Service of my Department monitor compliance with the Wildlife Acts and the European Community (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 across the country on an on-going basis and carry out patrols and site visits to enforce the various provisions of these Acts, as much as possible. They also investigate reports of breaches of the Acts with a view to initiating prosecutions where there is sufficient evidence to support same. Members of An Garda Síochána are also empowered under the Wildlife Acts and the European Communities legislation to investigate alleged offences and to prosecute if they see fit.

Over the last six years, three people have been prosecuted by the NPWS of my Department with illegal poisoning of birds. The NPWS of my Department is aware of the incident referred to in details supplied and the matter is presently under investigation. Accordingly, we cannot comment on this case beyond the facts below:

Following a report from a concerned landowner in West Cork, in early January this year, NPWS field staff collected 12 dead birds of prey which the landowner had come across in one of his fields. Subsequent searches of the general area by NPWS located 11 further dead birds.

While the investigation is still ongoing, NPWS are of the view that this case is an example of deliberate poisoning of wildlife, and are confident that this incident was not related to any agricultural practices in the area, nor with the landowner. I am grateful to the landowner for alerting the NPWS to this very serious incident, and local field staff are continuing with the intensive investigation into this case, including continued monitoring of the area, with a view to determining the source.

Testing of the carcasses was carried out by the Regional Veterinary Laboratory in Cork which confirmed that the cause of death was the banned insecticide Carbofuran. The use of Carbofuran products in agriculture has been banned in Ireland since June 2009.

The chemical had been shown worldwide to be toxic to much wildlife, but particularly toxic to birds. While it is no longer legally available anywhere in Europe, it is known to be illegally procured and used by that minority of people who persecute wildlife, particularly birds of prey.

My Department has successfully prosecuted offenders who employed this method previously. NPWS Regional staff launched an intensive investigation and the Gardai at Bandon Garda Station were also alerted to the incident. Subsequent searches of the general area did not result in any further findings of mortalities leaving the total recorded mortalities from this incident at 23.

As this is an open on-going legal investigation, it would not be appropriate to comment further on this case.

Údarás na Gaeltachta

1406. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

the process followed in the sale of a building (details supplied) which was owned by Údarás na Gaeltachta; the locations the sale was advertised; if the sale price is in line with market value for the area; the number of other sales there have been in the past ten years of land and property owned by Údarás na Gaeltachta in County Donegal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6183/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Seán Kyne): Údarás na Gaeltachta has confirmed that the sale of a 12,000 square metre factory, vacant since 2004, to a long-standing locally owned and managed company, is currently being processed as part of a job creation package that was approved by the board of Údarás na Gaeltachta in September 2019.

As a result of the expansion of this company, An tÚdarás approved the project based on the proposal by the company to add up to 45 additional jobs on the Gaoth Dobhair Business Park. The company itself has now declared their intention to double that figure on foot of new contracts confirmed recently.

The sale is being progressed currently in accordance with the appropriate procedures as laid down for Údarás na Gaeltachta in the disposal of property and lands in its ownership. Údarás na Gaeltachta has confirmed that following full assessment of the expansion proposals from the client company the sale of the property as part of the job creation package was deemed appropriate in order to ensure permanency and investment in this expansion phase.

As per the appropriate procedure, two independent valuations were received in order to ascertain the current market value of the building at the time of the sale. The higher of these valuations was selected and approved by the Board of Údarás as the minimum sale price for the property, subject to the property being used for enterprise and job creation.

As the Deputy is aware, the Donegal Gaeltacht and the Gaoth Dobhair area in particular has experienced significant job losses in the past which resulted in the establishment by Údarás na Gaeltachta of an employment taskforce in the recent past to develop proposals in order to increase employment opportunities in the area.

Notwithstanding the significant efforts of this taskforce and Údarás na Gaeltachta in actively seeking tenants or investors for the building, the former Snáth Comer factory has been empty since 2004 and has not been upgraded in any way during that period. This sale and expansion is a positive development for the Gaoth Dobhair area, which will see cutting edge research, development and innovation, and manufacturing taking place in this factory once again and most importantly, a proposed workforce in excess of 160 people in total.

This development is integral to the future growth of the company in question and facilitates its ability to secure new contracts, expand the workforce and produce new products in Gaoth Dobhair. The building will need to be renovated as well as being extended to allow for the installation of the appropriate machinery as and when required and the company itself will complete those works.

Údarás na Gaeltachta has confirmed that 14 sales of buildings, enterprise units/sub-units, or parcels of land have been completed in the County Donegal Gaeltacht over the last 10 years.

The sale of enterprise property to client companies with an appropriate business model, resources, structure and profile is a long-established successful method by Údarás na Gaeltachta and other development organisations to ensure longevity, sustainability and investment by companies in creating employment in rural Gaeltacht areas.

At a time of global uncertainty, it is encouraging to see companies that are willing to inno-

vate, develop and especially invest in their own local areas and to look to create new employment opportunities.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1407. **Deputy Noel Greally** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will consider the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business for the practice of classical ballet as proposed by an organisation (details supplied); the phase they will be able to re-open at; her views on same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6239/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): On the 1st of May, this Government published its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business to ease the COVID-19 restrictions and reopen Ireland's economy and society in a phased manner. The roadmap started from 18 May and the plan sets out five phases for unlocking restrictions, at three week intervals. At all times we will be guided by the advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team and each three week interval will see a review of public health situation.

A National Protocol has been finalised by Government, employers and trade unions, with the assistance of the Health and Safety Authority, which will support a gradual restart of economic activity as restrictions are eased, while protecting the health and safety of workers as they return to work.

The Protocol has been developed following discussions at the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF), which is the forum for high level dialogue between Government, Union and Employer representatives on matters of strategic national importance.

The Arts Council has recently appointed an Advisory Group to assess, inter alia, how arts organisations can emerge from lockdown, implementing hygiene and social distancing protocols as necessary, and how in due course, to safely return to public attendance and participation under advice from the relevant authorities.

While ultimately, it will be a matter for employers to assess their readiness to reopen safely in accordance with the National Protocol, my Department is engaging with its agencies, and through its agencies with a wide of sectorial stakeholders, on preparations under the Roadmap Plan and will continue to do so in the weeks ahead.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1408. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the Covid-19 supports announced by her Department or State agencies under her remit; the application process involved and deadlines for each such support; and if primary legislation will need to be enacted to operationalise any of these supports. [6253/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The COVID-19 crisis gives rise to many challenges for the nation as a whole and is having an unprecedented impact on the arts, culture, heritage and Gaeltacht sectors. While the full financial and economic implications of the crisis are not yet known, the impact on the sectors supported by the Department may extend well past the lifting of any COVID-19 restrictions.

Since the advent of the crisis, officials from my Department have been actively engaging with all sectors and continue to meet with those organisations under the aegis of the Department, as well as a broad range of sectorial stakeholders across all policy areas.

A number of initial support measures have been initiated by my Department, none of which require enactment of primary legislation and the Department continues to engage across its sectors on the range of cross-Government supports that are available as well as engaging on the challenges that are facing individual sectors.

Details of supports for the culture sector are available on my Department's Website at

<https://www.chg.gov.ie/covid19-supports-for-artists/>

Details of those supports put in place by State Agencies under my Department's remit can be accessed on their respective websites, as listed in the following table:

Body	Details available at:
Arts Council	http://www.artscouncil.ie
Screen Ireland	https://www.screenireland.ie/
Heritage Council	http://www.heritagecouncil.ie
Údarás na Gaeltachta	http://www.udaras.ie/
Waterways Ireland	https://www.waterwaysireland.org/
Foras na Gaeilge	http://www.forasnagaeilge.ie/

My Department will continue to engage with the agencies under its remit and other sectorial stakeholders to ensure that there is a high level of awareness of the supports that are available and to ensure that optimal use is made of available resources to best support the sector at this challenging time.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1409. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the detail of each Covid-19 business supports Údarás na Gaeltachta is providing to companies in Gaeltacht areas; the application process involved; and deadlines for each such support. [6254/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Seán Kyne): Údarás na Gaeltachta is engaging directly with its client companies to support them and their staff through these challenging times and is working alongside Government, State Agencies and the Gaeltacht community on a cohesive approach to the COVID-19 crisis.

An tÚdarás continues to advise client companies on contingency planning – financial planning, liquidity issues and recovery strategies and companies are being actively encouraged to avail of the COVID-19 support schemes that are available both nationally and through Údarás na Gaeltachta as detailed below.

Seminars, online resources and property solutions continue to be provided to such companies in order to support them in getting ready to reopen in the coming weeks. Údarás na Gaeltachta works closely with Enterprise Ireland (EI) to ensure that all support schemes available through EI are also available to client companies of an tÚdarás either directly or where required in partnership with EI.

The following business response supports are designed to help businesses stabilise and adapt to the evolving situation, in preparation for getting back on the road to recovery.

COVID-19 Business Financial Planning Grant

The COVID-19 Business Financial Planning Grant is a support available to Údarás na Gaeltachta SME clients and is operated in association with Enterprise Ireland. It is targeted at those manufacturing or internationally traded services companies that employ 10 or more full time employees. The grant helps companies to develop a robust financial plan with the support of professional assistance, including the preparation of documentation required to support applications for external finance from banks and/or other finance providers. The COVID-19 Business Financial Planning Grant, worth up to €5,000, enables companies to access external support from approved financial consultants to prepare a financial plan to secure the company in the short to medium terms.

The financial plan will:-

- help the company to understand its immediate liquidity issues; determine how to minimise costs and maximise sources of liquidity;
- ensure that the company has a framework to manage the finances of the business;
- create a financial plan to secure the external finance that the company requires through the coming months;
- represent 100% funding of up to €5,000 to access an approved financial consultant, and
- be open via online application.

Sustaining Enterprise Fund — HPSU

The Sustaining Enterprise Fund – HPSU is aimed at High Potential Start-Up (HPSU) companies who, due to the COVID-19 pandemic face delays to projected sales growth and whose fund-raising plans are significantly impacted or stalled. Under this fund, HPSUs can apply for co-investment of €50,000 per undertaking in the form of equity or convertible debt instruments. The fund is open to companies in whom Údarás na Gaeltachta has an existing HPSU seed stage equity investment, who showed strong commercial and technical progress prior to the COVID-19 crisis and can demonstrate a clear need for additional funding. This fund is available to Gaeltacht HPSUs and operated in conjunction with Enterprise Ireland.

Sustaining Enterprise Fund - Small Enterprise

The Sustaining Enterprise Fund - Small Enterprise purpose is to sustain eligible manufacturing and internationally traded services companies: who have been impacted by a 15% or more reduction in actual or projected turnover or profit and that require access to liquidity to sustain business continuity. This fund will provide a €25k to €50k short term working capital injection to eligible smaller companies to support business continuity and strengthen their ability to return to growth and be trading strongly in 3 years' time.

The objectives of the fund are provide financial support (against detailed costs and cash flows) to eligible companies for a 3-month period to support business continuity so that companies can return to viability and contribute to the recovery of the Irish economy.

Sustaining Enterprise Fund

This is specifically aimed at all firms with 10 or more employees impacted by COVID-19 that are vulnerable but viable. The Fund is available to eligible Údarás na Gaeltachta clients and operated in conjunction with Enterprise Ireland, providing repayable advances of up to €800,000 as agreed with the EU under new State Aid rules and, together with leveraged lending from the financial markets, should see up to €500m of additional investment in vulnerable but

viable firms. These grants will only be repayable if and when a business returns to financial good health.

Lean Business Continuity Voucher

The Lean Business Continuity Voucher is available to eligible companies with 10+ employees to access up to €2,500 in training or advisory services support related to the continued operation of their businesses during the current pandemic. The services may be in the form of management advice or training of management or staff within the company or a combination of both.

Companies can avail of support from a list of approved service providers.

The service provided focuses on the Operations of the company in terms of;

- Crisis response where appropriate,
- Sustaining Operations including process re-engineering (Lean, etc),
- Planning for resilience post crisis.

The Lean Business Continuity Voucher is open to small, medium or large client companies (including HPSUs) of Údarás na Gaeltachta and provided in conjunction with Enterprise Ireland.

Credit Guarantee Scheme

The Government's Credit Guarantee Scheme supports loans up to €1 million for periods of up to 7 years. Údarás na Gaeltachta is advising and mentoring companies on how to make applications to AIB, Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank.

Microfinance Ireland COVID-19 Loans

Microenterprises can access COVID-19 loans of up to €50,000 from MicroFinance Ireland. The Microfinance Ireland COVID-19 loan includes an option for a moratorium on interest and repayments for the first six months. Loans are available at an interest rate of between 4.5% and 5.5%. Údarás na Gaeltachta clients and Gaeltacht businesses can apply directly at microfinanceireland.ie following consultation with an Údarás na Gaeltachta development executive.

COVID-19 Retail Online Scheme

The new COVID-19 Retail Online Scheme is suitable to retailers employing over 10 people. The objective of the Scheme is to support companies in the indigenous retail sector with a pre-existing online presence to respond to both the domestic and international consumer demand for a competitive online offer. Successful applicants will be awarded funding to support a maximum of 80% of the project costs. Grants ranging from €10,000 to €40,000 will be awarded under the competitive scheme. Údarás na Gaeltachta is providing advice and support to Gaeltacht companies to assist them in preparing applications for the scheme which is operated by Enterprise Ireland

COVID-19 Údarás na Gaeltacht Online Trading Scheme

Údarás na Gaeltachta's Online Trading Scheme assists businesses impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. This scheme was originally introduced by Údarás na Gaeltachta in 2017 in order to increase the number of Gaeltacht businesses trading online and to increase Gaeltacht business sales online. Under the Online Trading Scheme a maximum grant of up to €2,500 or 50%

of eligible expenses, excluding VAT, whichever is lower, is available to eligible businesses to develop and strengthen their ability to trade 'online'.

COVID-19 Údarás na Gaeltachta Business Continuity Voucher

The Business Continuity Voucher is worth up to €2,500 in third party consultancy costs and can be used by companies and sole traders that employ up to 50 people to develop short-term and long-term strategies to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For a huge number of small businesses, survival is the over-riding objective at this time so making the right decisions is crucial. Successful applicants who avail of the voucher gain access to contingency planning advice to help continue trading through this crisis and prepare for the recovery phase. It also helps firms prepare a business case to apply for emergency financial interventions through the banks. The voucher assists different sectors, depending on the needs of each business, but includes significant measures such as preparing a business case for application to emergency funding, developing a business continuity plan, reducing variable costs, reviewing and exploring supply chain financing options, implementing remote working processes or procedures, and leveraging expertise in HR and ICT.

COVID-19 Act On Initiative Scheme

This support is available to Gaeltacht client companies which export and whose businesses is affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic. It provides access to 2 days consultancy engagement at no extra cost to assess financial management, strategic sourcing and transport and logistics advice.

Mentoring Scheme

The Mentoring Scheme provides support for a business mentor to assist businesses in the initial stage of their businesses or who give advice on specific areas of their business plan – vital assistance in these challenging times.

Údarás na Gaeltachta officials have been in contact with all clients directly to provide support, inform them of the best supports available to them and to assist them with the completion of forms.

Information and application forms for the various supports are available on the organisation's website and social media channels; Client companies are being urged to contact Údarás na Gaeltachta directly by phone in order to discuss their proposals with a Development Executive and to ascertain the support package most appropriate to a particular companies needs.

The COVID 19 support schemes will run until the end of 2020 as per all national schemes. Údarás na Gaeltachta also has its own range of schemes to support companies in their future development (Capital Investment, Marketing, Innovation and competitiveness).

Finally, can I reassure the Deputy that Údarás na Gaeltachta is continuing to work with colleagues across Government Departments and other State Agencies to develop further practical emergency supports for businesses based on these beneficial consultations.

Cúrsaí Gaeilge

1410. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Dara Calleary** den an Aire Cultúir, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta de réir an ráiteas go bhfuil sé fógartha ag a Roinn nach reáchtálfar aon chúrsa foghlama Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht an samhradh seo de bharr na paidéime Covid-19 an bhfuil sé i gceist ag

20 May 2020

a Roinn airgeadais a chuir ar fáil chun tacú leis na mná tí, leis na coistí agus leis na coláistí iad féin chun freastal ar an gcaillteanas a tharlóidh. [6255/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Seán Kyne): Dírím aird an Teachta ar na ceisteanna atá freagartha agam cheana féin faoin ábhar seo. Mar atá ráite agam cheana féin, tar éis dul i gcomhairle leis na húdaráis sláinte agus ar mhaithe le sláinte phoiblí a chosaint, ag cur san áireamh na bearta éigeandála atá á nglacadh maidir le Covid-19, d'fhógair mo Roinn le gairid nach reáchtálfar aon chúrsa foghlama Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht an samhradh seo de bharr na paindéime Covid-19.

Aithnítear gur cuid lárnach de bhonneagar sóisialta agus geilleagrach na Gaeltachta iad na coláistí agus suas le 27,000 scoláire go bliantúil ag freastal ar cheann de 42 coláiste agus iad ag fanacht le ceann den 700 teaghlach Gaeltachta atá incháilithe faoi Scéim na bhfoghlaimoírí Gaeilge de chuid na Roinne le lóistín a chur ar fáil. Meastar gur fiú c.€50m sa bhliain í earnáil na gcoláistí Gaeilge do gheilleagar na Gaeltachta nuair a chuirtear san áireamh na hóstáin, tithe aíochta, bialann agus gnólachtaí a dtugann tuismitheoirí na bhfoghlaimoírí cuairt orthu i gcaitheamh an tsamhraidh.

Mar atá luaite agam roimhe seo, tá cíoradh á dhéanamh i rith an ama ag an Roinn ar an mbealach is fearr is féidir chun earnáil na gcoláistí Gaeilge a chobhsú. Chuige sin, tá mé féin agus oifigigh mo Roinne i dteagmháil i rith an ama le scáthghrúpa na gcoláistí samhraidh, CONCOS.

Is i gcomhar le páirtithe leasmhara atá an obair seo idir lámha i dtreo féachaint chuige go mbeidh teacht aniar ann don earnáil trí chéile in 2021 agus sna blianta ina dhiaidh sin.

Departmental Expenditure

1411. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the capital spend by her Department to date in 2020, including the capital carry over from 2019, by subhead. [6260/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Details of capital expenditure by my Department and all Government departments are published by the Department of Finance on a monthly basis:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c46b76-fiscal-monitor-april-2020/>

Total capital expenditure for my Department to 30 April 2020 amounts to €20.98m as detailed in the following table. Total expenditure from capital carryover to 30 April 2020 amounts to €525,000.

These figures are provisional as all expenditure within my Department's Vote is subject to an on going internal verification and monitoring process to ensure the best use of available financial resources. Adjustments may fall to be made between subheads as part of this process and all figures are subject to audit by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Subhead		Expenditure to 30/04/2020 €000s
(v)	OFFICE EQUIPMENT AND EXTERNAL IT SERVICES	292
A.5	GENERAL EXPENSES OF IRISH MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, CHESTER BEATTY LIBRARY, NATIONAL CONCERT HALL & CRAWFORD GALLERY	415

Subhead		Expenditure to 30/04/2020 €000s
A.7	CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND DEVELOPMENT	395
A.9	AN CHOMHAIRLE EALAÍON	440
A.10	GENERAL EXPENSES OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND	200
A.11	GENERAL EXPENSES OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF IRELAND	179
A.12	FÍS EIREANN	6,000
A.13	NATIONAL GALLERY OF IRELAND	429
A.14	EUROPEAN CITY OF CULTURE	2,653
B.3	HERITAGE COUNCIL	478
B.4	BUILT HERITAGE	191
B.5	NATURAL HERITAGE (NATIONAL PARKS AND WILD-LIFE SERVICE)	557
B.8	PEATLANDS RESTORATION, CONSERVATION & MANAGEMENT	1,583
C.3	GAELTACHT SUPPORT SCHEMES	214
C.4	IRISH LANGUAGE SUPPORT SCHEMES	2
C.8	ÚDARÁS NA GAELTACHTA - GRANTS FOR PROJECTS AND CAPITAL EXPENDITURE ON PREMISES	4,317
C.9	ISLANDS	5
D.4	WATERWAYS IRELAND	2,630
	Total	20,980

Wildlife Protection

1412. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the terms of reference or rules of procedure of the wildlife crime committee in her Department; the members of the committee; and if all minutes of meetings of the committee will be provided. [6352/20]

1415. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the procedures in place within her Department for evidence gathering and investigating illegal poisonings and other wildlife crimes; and the persons or bodies tasked with leading investigations. [6355/20]

1418. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht her views on whether greater resources need to be allocated to tackling wildlife crimes in view of the ongoing illegal poisonings of birds of prey and the lack of successful prosecutions for these crimes. [6358/20]

1427. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the process by which wildlife crimes are investigated; if public reporting of the outcome of investigations of wildlife crimes are carried out; the number of criminal investigations carried out under the Wildlife Act 1976 in each of the past ten years; the number of investigations which have been successfully upheld in court in each of the past ten years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6956/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1412, 1415, 1418 and 1427 together.

The Wildlife Acts 1976 to 2018 are the primary statutes designed to afford protection to the

various species in the State and which set out the framework for dealing with wildlife crime. In addition, the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 include provisions affording strict protection to a number of species and habitats.

Wildlife crime takes many forms ranging from persecution of badgers, illegal hunting of deer species, illegal hunting of hares with packs of dogs generally known as lurchers, trapping of wild birds such as native finches for illegal trade, wilfully disturbing or destroying the eggs or nests of wild birds, poisoning of raptor species and the illegal cutting of hedges during the nesting season for birds.

Within my Department, the National Parks and Wildlife Service has responsibility for the protection and conservation of Ireland's natural heritage, including species protection and biodiversity at national level.

As well as more senior regionally based officers of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) of my Department, NPWS Conservation Rangers are stationed around the country and deal with enforcement matters under the Wildlife Acts. Conservation Rangers are deployed through a regional structure and assignments are determined in light of Departmental business needs and priorities.

Some of their work entails scientific research and survey work and the monitoring of compliance with national and European law in relation to nature conservation and wildlife crime across the country. The team also conducts patrols and site visits to enforce the various provisions of national and EU legislation and investigate reports of breaches of legislation including the various types of wildlife crime I have already described. My Department works closely with An Garda Síochána who are also specifically empowered under the Acts to investigate alleged wildlife crime offences and to prosecute as they see fit.

In the period 2013 to date in 2020 some 90 prosecutions were taken by my Department for breaches of the Wildlife Acts ranging from illegal deer and hare hunting, the cutting of hedges and vegetation and the poisoning of bird species. I will arrange for Deputy Whitmore to receive a yearly breakdown of prosecutions since 2010. These cases are heard in District Courts and my Department has issued press statements on individual cases over the years. For example, in 2019 my Department issued some 10 press statements on successful wildlife crime prosecutions. While bringing perpetrators of crime to justice is important, the success of dealing with wildlife crime cannot be judged on this alone, as ensuring compliance in the first instance is clearly of critical importance.

Given concerns about wildlife crime, an internal Wildlife Crime Group made up of senior Departmental officials and regional field staff has been established and meets regularly. The primary purpose of the Group is to ensure that the NPWS can realise its enforcement functions under the Wildlife Acts and European legislation as effectively as possible including consideration of how working with other agencies and organisations can enable the Department to fulfil its functions in tackling wildlife crime.

The Wildlife Crime Group has pursued many important initiatives including the organisation of a major Wildlife Crime Conference in 2018 which was attended by An Garda Síochána and representatives from organisations in Britain and Northern Ireland dealing with wildlife crime.

I am committed to ensuring that we continue with vigour our actions to tackle wildlife crime including incidents such as the recent killing of buzzards in Co Cork and to working with other agencies, including An Garda Síochána and the I.S.P.C.A to counteract these illegal activities.

Wildlife Protection

1413. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the reason the deaths of 22 buzzards poisoned in late 2019 in County Cork did not appear in the Raptor Protocol 2019 report published in April 2020. [6353/20]

1414. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the reason her Department has made no statement on the poisoning of 22 buzzards in County Cork in 2019 despite it being the largest single incident recorded; and the protocol for releasing statements on illegal poisoning incidents. [6354/20]

1416. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the persons or bodies that led the investigation into the poisoning of 22 buzzards in late 2019 in County Cork; the actions and lines of inquiry taken; and the outcomes of same. [6356/20]

1420. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht her views on the reports of the largest poisoning of birds of prey for a number of years which happened recently in County Cork; if there is an investigation underway into this case; if there is funding in place and strategies to combat the systemic harm and poisoning of the under threat birds of prey; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6494/20]

1424. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if her attention has been drawn to a large number of birds of prey in County Cork being poisoned; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6569/20]

1428. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the details of the most recent mass poisoning of buzzards in County Cork which occurred in late 2019 including specifics of the poisoning; the process by which it was investigated; the outcome of the investigation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6957/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1413, 1414, 1416, 1420, 1424 and 1428 together.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) of my Department is aware of this incident of poisoning. As the matter is presently under ongoing and active investigation by the NPWS, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on this case beyond the following facts:

Following a report from a concerned landowner in West Cork, in early January this year, NPWS field staff collected 12 dead buzzards which the landowner had come across in one of his fields. Subsequent searches of the general area by NPWS located 11 further dead buzzards.

Testing of the carcasses was carried out by the Regional Veterinary Laboratory in Cork which confirmed that the cause of death was the banned insecticide Carbofuran. The use of Carbofuran products in agriculture has been banned in Ireland since June 2009. The chemical had been shown worldwide to be toxic to much wildlife, but particularly toxic to birds. While it is no longer legally available in the European Union, it is known to be illegally procured and used by that minority of people who persecute wildlife, particularly birds of prey.

On learning of the incident, NPWS Regional staff immediately launched an intensive investigation and the Gardai at Bandon Garda Station were also alerted to the incident. More recent searches of the general area did not result in any further findings of buzzard mortalities leaving the total recorded mortalities from this incident at 23.

While the investigation is still ongoing, it is the view of NPWS that this incident was not

related to any agricultural practices in the area, nor with the landowner but rather that it is a case of deliberate poisoning of wildlife.

Buzzards are a species that became extinct in Ireland the late 19th century. Having re-established themselves in Northern Ireland in the 1930's, they have steadily colonised many counties in Ireland and have now become a welcome addition to Ireland's avian biodiversity. Incidents such as this impede this recolonisation and are to be condemned not least at a time when the awareness and appreciation of the value of our biodiversity is on the increase.

I am very grateful to the landowner for alerting us to this very serious incident, and local field staff are continuing with the intensive investigation into this case, including continued monitoring of the area, with a view to determining the source.

My Department has provided funding for satellite tags for research on the movements of some of the introduced birds of prey and hen harrier and these have provided important information on poisoning. In relation to the Raptor Protocol, this is a collaborative approach between my Department, the Regional Veterinary Laboratories, and the State Laboratory to systematically determine the extent to which human actions (for example poisoning, persecution, disturbance, collisions, etc.) are threats to Ireland's native birds of prey. My Department issues an on-line report annually providing records, information and analysis of mortality and persecution of birds of prey. Details relating to the poisoning of the buzzards in West Cork, which I have already stated came to my Department's attention in January this year, will be included in the Raptor Protocol Report for 2020.

Question No. 1415 answered with Question No. 1412.

Question No. 1416 answered with Question No. 1413.

Wildlife Protection

1417. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the details of the investigation into the illegal poisoning of a hen harrier in November 2019 in County Meath (details supplied); the person or body tasked with leading the investigation within her Department; the actions taken; and the outcomes of same. [6357/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Local field staff of the National Parks and Wildlife Service of my Department are aware of this incident to which the Deputy refers and the matter is currently under active investigation. Accordingly, I am not in a position to comment on the issue any further at this time.

Question No. 1418 answered with Question No. 1412.

National Library

1419. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the amount spent to date on the upgrading of the east and west wings of the National Library; and the duration of such works. [6375/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The €14.7 million National Library of Ireland building redevelopment project "Re-imagining the National Library" is part of Project Ireland 2040. The first Phase 1 was to provide a modern, secure, state-of-the art book repository in which a substantial part of the Library's priceless

book collection is now housed. I had the honour of unveiling the new facility in June 2019.

The completion of the first phase of the Library's capital development project was a huge milestone. It involved moving 350,000 volumes from five floors of storage in the Victorian West Wing. The book repository gives us all a great sense of relief with the safeguarding of the national published collections. To date, funding of over €1.6 million has been made available by my Department.

The next phases include investigative works in the Library's West Wing and the development of new public spaces and services, as well as providing universal access for all visitors.

Question No. 1420 answered with Question No. 1413.

Arts Council

1421. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she has met formally with the new director of the Arts Council; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6518/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I have met with the new Director of the Arts Council remotely on a number of occasions including 15 April, 21 April and again on 1 May.

In addition, officials from my Department are in ongoing contact with the Arts Council and as well as with a broad range of sectorial stakeholders including resource organisations, advocacy groups as well as individual artists and arts practices.

The Council has undertaken a detailed survey of arts organisations to identify the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on audiences, employment and finances for March, April and May as well as a survey of artists seeking information of the economic impact on individual artists.

My Department has worked with the Arts Council from an early stage in the COVID-19 crisis, on measures to sustain our cultural infrastructure, support artists and arts practitioners and ensure the ongoing provision of cultural services. Following a meeting I convened on 12 March with the Arts Council, the national cultural institutions and Screen Ireland, the Arts Council announced a series of immediate measures, including an undertaking to honour all funding commitments made to organisations and allow grantees to draw down up to 90% of their funding commitment.

In the context of the wider cultural sector, officials from my Department are continuing to work with the Arts Council as well as other parts of Government, to assess and measure the effects of COVID-19 on the cultural sector and continue to plan how best to manage through this crisis.

Údarás na Gaeltachta

1422. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the budget allocation for Údarás Na Gaeltachta in 2019 and 2020, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6526/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Seán Kyne): The core exchequer allocation from my department to Údarás na Gaeltachta in

respect of 2019 and 2020 is outlined in the following table:

Subhead	2019 Current	2019 Capital	2020 Current	2020 Capital
C6 – Údarás Administration	€9.442m		€9.602m	
C7 – Údarás Current	€3.850m		€4.050m	
C8 – Údarás Capital		€9.7m*		€10m
Total	€13.292m	€9.7m	€13.652m	€10m

* An additional capital allocation of €0.7m, arising from savings elsewhere in the Department's Vote was secured for an tÚdarás in 2018 and carried forward to 2019 and is included in the figure provided.

In addition, Údarás na Gaeltachta also receives current funding from my Department in respect of cultural and language planning activities under the following subheads:

Subhead	2019	2020
C3 – Community and Language Support Programme	€0.330m	€0.350m
C10 – Language Planning Pro- cess	€2.600m	to be agreed*
Total	€2.930m	€350k to date

*Preparatory work in relation to the 2020 financial allocation to Údarás to progress the on-going implementation of the language planning process is currently being finalised.

In the interests of completeness, I should also mention that when the funding allocated to An tÚdarás under the Rural Regeneration & Development Fund as well as that allocated under the Regional Enterprise Development Fund is included, it results in an additional capital funding allocation of €10.484m being available to An tÚdarás to date over the period in question.

A breakdown of that funding is outlined in the following table:

Rural Regeneration and Development Fund	Date Announced	€
Completion of the undeveloped top floor level of gteic Gaoth Dobhair	23/11/2018	€1.500m
gteic An Spidéal Innovation and Digital Hub in Conamara.	23/11/2018	€0.548m
8 Innovation Centres/Digital Hubs/Cen- tres of Excellence in the Mayo Gaeltacht.	23/11/2018	€0.795m
To develop a master-plan for the rede- velopment of the former Dingle Work House.	11/02/2019	€0.415m
To support the design and development of a range of new community, sporting and educational facilities on a state- owned site in Baile an Fheirtéaraigh, Co. Kerry.	11/02/2019	€0.293m

Rural Regeneration and Development Fund	Date Announced	€
The development of projects identified in the Action Plan for Uíbh Ráthach in South Kerry.	11/02/2019	€0.174m
To develop a master-plan for the Coláiste Íosagáin campus in Baile Bhuirne, Co. Cork.	11/02/2019	€0.180m
To develop a major tourism hub 'Áras Scéalta an Atlantaigh' in Eachléim on the Erris Peninsula, Co. Mayo	08/11/2019	€1.879m
Total		€5.784m

Regional Enterprise Development Fund	Date Announced	€
To develop a market-focused marine innovation and development centre as part of the Páirc na Mara Marine Innovation Campus in Cill Chiaráin, Co. Galway.	03/12/2018	€2.0m
To develop, implement and manage a Regional Development Hub (RDH) in support of enterprise creation on the Coláiste Íosagáin campus in Baile Bhuirne, Co. Cork.	08/01/2019	€2.7m
Total		€4.7m

Finally, can I reassure the Deputy that my Department is continuing to work with colleagues across other relevant Government Departments and State Agencies in order to mitigate insofar as possible the challenges being faced by Údarás na Gaeltachta in the context of the Covid-19 crisis.

Waterways Ireland

1423. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the capital spending of her Department in 2019; the capital funding allocated to Waterways Ireland; the projects undertaken by Waterways Ireland with the allocation; the specific funding per project; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6535/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Capital expenditure for my Department in 2019 amounted to €70.108 million. In addition, the sum of €0.7m was expended in respect of capital carried over into 2019 from 2018. All figures are provisional as they are subject to audit by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General and adjustments may fall to be made. Details of the final outturn for the Department will be published in the Annual Appropriation Account for 2019 and will be made available on the website of the Comptroller and Auditor General later this year.

The original capital funding allocated by my Department to Waterways Ireland in 2019 was €4,380,000. In November 2019, there was an additional allocation of €725,000 bringing the total allocation to €5,105,000.

The following table details the capital projects undertaken, and the funding allocated to each

project, by Waterways Ireland in 2019.

Waterways Ireland Capital Funding allocation 2019

Capital Project	Funding
Weir Repair	€1,648,660
Lock Gate Repairs	€934,152
Infrastructure Repairs	€672,792
Depot Costs	€369,477
Fleet & Plant	€291,517
Bank Repairs	€201,296
Cycleways/Blueways	€199,284
Jetty Repair	€197,168
Dredging	€168,090
Environmental/Feasibility Studies	€129,284
Total	€5,104,997

Question No. 1424 answered with Question No. 1413.

Departmental Funding

1425. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the status of funding for programmes that do not require physical presence to complete, for example, writer in residences. [6577/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): My Department has worked with the Arts Council and other stakeholders on measures to sustain our cultural infrastructure, support artists and arts practitioners and ensure the ongoing provision of cultural services.

Since the advent of the crisis, officials from my Department have been actively engaging with the arts sector and have met and continue to meet with arts and cultural organisations under its aegis, as well a broad range of sectorial stakeholders including resource organisations, advocacy groups as well as individual artists and arts practices

My Department and the Arts Council are providing detailed advice for arts and arts organisations on their websites. Priority is being given towards supporting the artists and arts workers. The Arts Council responded quickly to the impact of COVID-19 on the arts sector. At the start of the COVID-19 emergency, the Council introduced a series of measures to help artists and arts organisations manage their businesses during the period of the COVID-19 crisis.

These measures include honouring all existing funding commitments and asking regularly funded arts organisation to prioritise their own payments to artists in turn. Since March 12th the Arts Council has fast-tracked the payment of up to 90% of funding to organisations and individuals.

The Arts Council has announced that there will be no financial penalties for arts organisations and individuals unable to deliver programmed events and activities arising from the impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

I understand also, that in light of the Covid-19 crisis, a number of the Arts Council's 2020

grant deadlines have been repurposed in certain cases. In this regard a number of awards where the money was not committed have been reallocated to a new suite of programmes (including expanded bursary, commission and professional development awards) designed to sustain the ecology to the end of the year, while also offering support which enables artists to develop work and supports arts workers enhancing their skill set. This new proposed approach has been informed by these recent sectorial surveys as well as the Council's own strategic objectives. Progress is also continuing with College of Education residences and with writer in residence programmes in a number of universities. These had been initiated before the onset of Covid 19.

The Department will continue to engage with the agencies under its remit and other sectorial stakeholders to ensure that there is the greatest level of awareness of the supports that have been made available by Government and to ensure that optimal use is made of available resources to best support the sector at this challenging time.

Departmental Data

1426. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the breakdown of visitor numbers to each of the national culture institutions in 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [6903/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The total visitor numbers for the National Cultural Institutions in 2019 are set out in the following table:

Institution	Total
National Library of Ireland	284,085
Irish Museum of Modern Art	503,904
National Concert Hall	324,671
National Gallery of Ireland	761,273
Chester Beatty Library	367,384
National Archives	9,634
National Museum of Ireland, Kildare St.- Archaeology	505,420
National Museum of Ireland, Collins Bar- racks - Decorative Arts & History	230,729
Natural History Museum, Merrion St - Natural History	387,493
National Museum of Ireland, Turlough Park - Country Life	127,127
Crawford Art Gallery	265,438
Total for NCIs	3,767,158

The following table sets out the visitor numbers for the first three months in 2020 up to the date of closure related to the COVID-19 crisis ie 12 March.

Institution	January	February	March	Total
National Library of Ireland	22,076	23,815	7,613	53,504
Irish Museum of Modern Art	43,412	34,232	12,690	90,334

National Concert Hall	27,055	21,801	10,817	59,673
National Gallery of Ireland	61,357	59,568	21,020	141,945
Chester Beatty Library	19,621	23,210	8,481	51,312
National Archives	627	935	272	1,834
National Museum of Ireland, Kildare St. - Archaeology	21,764	24,331	14,799	60,894
National Museum of Ireland, Collins Barracks - Decorative Arts & History	16,585	18,488	10,559	45,632
Natural History Museum, Merrion St - Natural History	23,841	28,795	14,114	66,750
National Museum of Ireland, Turlough Park - Country Life	3,381	5,125	2,978	11,484
Crawford Art Gallery	18,309	22,001	8,071	48,381
Total for NCIs	258,028	262,301	111,414	631,743

Question No. 1427 answered with Question No. 1412.

Question No. 1428 answered with Question No. 1413.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1429. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if a detailed set of guidelines will be presented on the way in which artistic spaces and venues, be they large or small, should re-open when the appropriate time is announced; and the way in which venues should appropriately enact social distancing measures while maintaining the commercial viability of their venue. [7001/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): On the 1st of May, the Government published its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business to ease the COVID-19 restrictions and reopen Ireland's economy and society in a phased manner. The Roadmap started from 18 May and the plan sets out five phases for unlocking restrictions, at three week intervals. At all times we will be guided by the advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team and each three week interval will see a review of public health situation.

The Roadmap will see museums, galleries, and other cultural outlets re-open under Phase 4 of the roadmap from the 20th of July, but only where people can move freely with appropriate social distancing maintained and strict hand hygiene is enforced on entry. Theatres and cinemas may open under Phase 5 of the plan, subject to the maintenance of social distancing. The constraints and restrictions which are now part of life pose challenges for everyone working and this is equally true in the cultural sector in adapting venues and buildings to ensure public health is protected.

As outlined in the Roadmap, a National Protocol has been finalised by Government, em-

ployers and trade unions, with the assistance of the Health and Safety Authority, which will support a gradual restart of economic activity as restrictions are eased, while protecting the health and safety of workers as they return to work.

The Protocol has been developed following discussions at the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF), which is the forum for high level dialogue between Government, Union and Employer representatives on matters of strategic national importance.

Preparatory work is also being undertaken by many individual groups, bodies and agencies in relation to the safe re-opening of workplaces and facilities.

The Arts Council has asked its recently appointed Advisory Group to assess how arts organisations can emerge from lockdown, implementing hygiene and social distancing protocols as necessary, and how in due course, to safely return to public attendance and participation under advice from the relevant authorities.

Nationally, the collective impact of increasing access and mobility will have to be continually assessed. Final responsibility for assessing the readiness of a venue or facility will rest with the relevant employers/operators in each case.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1430. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if capital costs will be offered to artistic and cultural spaces to support the re-opening of these amenities. [7002/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The COVID-19 crisis gives rise to many challenges for the nation as a whole and is having an unprecedented impact on the on the arts, culture, heritage and Gaeltacht sectors. As part of its suite of responses to the COVID-19 situation, the Government issued guidance on returning to the workplace on 9th May. The 'Return to Work Safely Protocol' clearly and comprehensively sets out the steps and processes that businesses must take to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. It is a matter for all employers to ensure their workplaces are safe for staff and customers alike.

I am very aware that the reopening of arts and culture venues will pose challenges for many of these organisations. They may need to make modifications to their entrances, foyer spaces, seating areas for example, to ensure social distancing and any other necessary measures are maintained and adhered to.

My Department is currently examining its small capital grant schemes for arts and culture organisations in the context of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1431. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if announcements of financial supports will be made to assist freelance technicians who could not be classified as artists but are essential to the functioning of the industry and have been equally as affected by the Covid-19 crisis. [7007/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): As part of its suite of responses to the COVID-19 situation, the Government introduced new temporary

measures to provide financial support to workers affected by the COVID-19 crisis including the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment and a Temporary COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme.

The COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment, which is the responsibility of my colleague the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, offers a payment to employees and to the self-employed who have lost their job on (or after) 13 March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. An application in respect of the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment can be made both by employees who have lost their job, been temporarily laid off, asked to stay at home, or are not getting any money from an employer; and the self-employed who have temporarily ceased trading due to the pandemic.

The Temporary COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme is administered by the Revenue Commissioners. The scheme is predicated on the employer wanting to keep employees on the payroll and to retain them until business picks up by enabling employees, whose employers are affected by the pandemic, to receive significant supports directly from their employer through the payroll system. The scheme is expected to last 12 weeks from 26 March 2020 and will cover 70% of the net salary of workers, up to a maximum of €410 per week.

These two schemes are in addition to the normal state supports that remain in place.

There is nothing in the legislation excluding any sector or profession in the economy. Equally freelance and/or self-employed people can qualify for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment. My Department provides a helpdesk advice facility on income support for individuals at artsunit@chg.gov.ie and I would encourage people in the sector to make contact for advice.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1432. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht her plans to provide supports for the live entertainment industry (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7008/20]

1433. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will seek supports from Coronavirus response investment initiative to specifically support live entertainment performers whose industry has collapsed as a result of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7009/20]

1434. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will discuss with the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection a new mechanism to ensure that all artists, musicians, performers and technical support staff whose work is precarious by nature and have lost their income due to Covid-19, are eligible for the Covid-19 payment, even if they were not working on the date required by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7010/20]

1435. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if additional funds will be made available to the Covid-19 crisis response award by the Arts Council in order to support artists that have lost income as a result of the health crisis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7011/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1432 to 1435, inclusive, together.

In the context of the wider cultural sector, the Department has met and continues to meet with arts and cultural organisations under its aegis. My Department and the Arts Council are providing detailed advice for arts and arts organisations on their websites. Priority is being given towards supporting the artists and arts workers. These matters will receive further consideration in the context of the recovery phase.

Following a meeting I convened on 12 March with the Arts Council, the National Cultural Institutions and Screen Ireland, the Arts Council announced a series of immediate measures, including an undertaking to honour all funding commitments made to organisations and allow grantees to draw down up to 90% of their funding commitment. To facilitate this, my Department advanced payment of the annual allocation to the Arts Council. These measures were taken to ensure grantees could continue to operate and meet their financial commitments, particularly to individual artists. The measures provided much needed support to arts and cultural organisations and, more importantly, those working in the sector.

I announced measures on 3 April to enable artists and cultural workers to share their work through alternative channels and this included the Arts Council's Covid-19 crisis response award, and the Ireland Performs grant from Culture Ireland and Facebook Ireland. The Covid-19 crisis response award of €3,000 per grantee supports the creation and dissemination of new artistic work for the public benefit and was jointly funded by the Arts Council and my Department.

The Arts Council is in daily contact with a broad range of artists and organisations to understand how COVID-19 is impacting the sector. The Council continues to operate fully throughout the COVID-19 crisis to support artists and arts organisations through this difficult time. Regular updates are being provided on its website and on social media channel.

The Arts Council has based its response to Covid-19 on sectorial engagement which includes surveying, focus groups and other forms of interaction with funded and non-funded organisations and individual artists.

The Council has also undertaken a detailed survey of arts organisations to identify the impact on audiences, employment and finances for March, April and May as well as a survey of artists seeking information of the economic impact on individual artists.

The Department will continue to engage with the agencies under its remit and other sectorial stakeholders to ensure that there is the greatest level of awareness of the supports that have been made available by Government and to ensure that optimal use is made of available resources to best support the sector at this challenging time.

The Department has also engaged on a bilateral basis with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection on social welfare supports, with the Department of Business Enterprise and Innovation on liquidity and other supports for businesses, and is engaged on an ongoing basis with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on all aspects of the impacts of the crisis on the sector.

More recently, officials from my Department met with commercial interests on the plans for reopening in line with the Government's Roadmap.

Departmental Contracts

1436. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the amount spent on external consultants by her Department in 2019; the average hourly

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rate; if caps or limits on such spending are in place; the way in which conflicts of interest are managed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7277/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I am advised that no expenditure was incurred on external consultancy from my Department's Administrative Budget in 2019.

My Department commissions engineering, environmental and other experts from time to time to provide technical reports or advice on specific issues. While the providers of these services are consultant engineers, environmental consultants etc., or may describe themselves in other such terms, their work is not classified as consultancy services and is not funded from my Department's Administrative Budget.