

27 May 2020

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].

Covid-19 Pandemic

1. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach the source of the information outlined in his correspondence of 29 April 2020 in which he indicated to this Deputy the target of 100,000 tests a week was agreed by NPHEM on 14 April 2020; the reason the published note of the NPHEM meeting does not record such a target; if he will provide a copy of the briefings and other written records he has received after each NPHEM meeting for April and May 2020, respectively; and the person or body that provides him with briefings after each NPHEM meeting. [7175/20]

The Taoiseach: The Department of Health provided the information outlined in the correspondence of the 29th April 2020.

I understand the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHEM) recommendation to expand testing capacity to 100,000 tests per week is recorded in the minutes of 17th April 2020.

The NPHEM provides direction, guidance, support and expert public health advice on responding to COVID-19 in Ireland. Its advice is provided to the Minister for Health. The letter is also copied to a senior official in my Department who chairs the senior officials group which supports the Cabinet Committee on the Government response to COVID-19. Copies of the letters are published and available on *gov.ie*.

There is regular ongoing liaison between officials in my Department and the Department of Health.

Briefings on NPHEM considerations and on disease progression are provided to me at meetings with the Minister for Health and his officials, including the Chief Medical Officer, and/or with my officials.

The Cabinet Committee on COVID-19 has been briefed by the CMO and other relevant senior officials as required.

At each Government meeting an overview of the collective management of the response to COVID-19 is prepared including data on the progression of the disease and, where relevant, the outputs of NPHEM.

Where Government is implementing NPHEM advice, that is the subject of a formal Government decision.

Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements

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2. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Taoiseach if he has engaged with his UK and Northern Ireland counterparts on the implications of the proposed mandatory quarantine period on cross-Border travel and trade. [7582/20]

The Taoiseach: As I set out in a PQ reply on 20 May, I spoke with the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Friday 15 May. 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 as well as our respective approaches to related travel restrictions. We also considered recent Brexit developments during the course of our conversation.

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 also explained our expectation that passengers from overseas would complete a locator form and self isolate for 14 days. Passengers transiting to Northern Ireland would be exempt from these arrangements.

There is ongoing North South and East West engagement on Covid responses across government at both political and official level. We will continue to seek opportunities for common or similar approaches to managing Covid, where that would be beneficial.

Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements

3. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with representatives of the Catholic Church. [8063/20]

The Taoiseach: On 14 May last I met (by video conference) with representatives of the Catholic Church, Archbishop Eamon Martin, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin and Archbishop Kieran O'Reilly to share thoughts on the reopening of places of worship over the course of the summer. The Church shared information on the work that is being done at all levels to develop a national church plan for the safe reopening and emphasised it will play its part in applying public health measures to ensure the health and safety of its congregation. I also met with Archbishop Diarmuid Martin as part of a video conference with leaders of the main Faiths and Non-confessional organisations on 8 April where we discussed the effects which Covid-19 is having on their communities.

Cabinet Committees

4. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach the dates on which each of the Cabinet committees have met in the past three months, in tabular form. [8064/20]

The Taoiseach: In the past three months the main focus of the Government has been on the Covid-19 crisis. In that time there have been 22 Government meetings and the Cabinet Committee on Covid-19 has met five times - 9 March, 16 March, 2 April, 16 April and 20 April.

Charitable and Voluntary Organisations

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5. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if a charity (details supplied) has confirmed with him the board members of a company. [8065/20]

The Taoiseach: The Charity in question has not confirmed with me the board members of a company, nor would I expect it to. Governance of Charities is the responsibility for the Charities Regulator which is fully independent in the performance of its statutory functions under Section 14 (3) of the Charities Act 2009.

Síle de Búrca 0872846235

Miriam Dollard 0876086785

UN Missions

6. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence the status of Defence Forces personnel on the UNIFIL operation whose return here has been delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic; the efforts underway to resolve the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7081/20]

17. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence if clarity will be provided to Defence Forces personnel serving on UN missions overseas on when they will be returning; and his plans to ensure a timely rotation. [8203/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 6 and 17 together.

As part of its response to the global Covid pandemic, on 5 April, 2020 the United Nations Secretary General directed the suspension of all rotations and leave for military personnel serving in UN missions until 30 June, effective immediately.

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.

The UN directed that only in certain very limited and extenuating circumstances would any exemption be allowed. This was 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.

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, though 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. The Department and the Defence Forces are currently progressing options to rotate 2 personnel deployed to the MONUSCO mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

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, is thus more complex,

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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.

In accordance with the process laid down by the UN Secretary General, a submission was made by the Defence Forces through the Senior Irish Officer to the UNIFIL Force Commander seeking an exemption. The Chief of Staff both wrote to and spoke to the Force Commander. In tandem with this, the Department of Foreign Affairs through our Permanent Mission in New York engaged with UN Headquarters at senior level.

I can now advise that the UN has agreed to an exemption of the suspension for Ireland which will allow Ireland to rotate its full contingent to UNIFIL during the UN moratorium. The first rotation has now been confirmed by the UN for 21 June and the second for 29 June.

As the dates for the rotations have now been confirmed by the UN, I hope that this will now ease the impact of the delayed reunion with families. The confirmed dates have been communicated by the military authorities to Defence Forces personnel coming home and those going out to Lebanon to commence their deployment.

In accordance with agreed arrangements, the United Nations will be responsible for making the transport arrangements for the rotation of UNIFIL troops in June.

Defence Forces Equipment

7. Deputy Catherine Connolly asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence the estimated full year cost of purchasing 15 extra combat support service armoured 8 x 8 drop vehicles for the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7120/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): My priority as Minister with Responsibility for Defence is to ensure that the operational capability of the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service is maintained to the greatest extent possible so as to enable the Defence Forces to carry out their roles as assigned by Government both at home and overseas.

The acquisition of new equipment for the Defence Forces remains a clear focus for me. Future equipment priorities for the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service are considered in the context of the White Paper on Defence as part of the capability development and equipment priorities planning process. The principal aim over the period of the White Paper will be to replace and upgrade, as required, existing capabilities in order to retain a flexible response for a wide range of operational requirements, including response to security risks and other emergencies, both at home and overseas.

The capital allocation for Defence is €113 million for 2020, an increase of €7 million on the National Development Plan 2019 allocation. The NDP - Project Ireland 2040 - provides financial allocations for a total of €541 million for Defence over the period 2018-2022. This level of capital funding will allow the Defence Organisation to undertake a programme of sustained equipment replacement and infrastructural development across the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service as identified and prioritised in the Defence White Paper and builds on the significant investment programme over recent years.

The White Paper on Defence provides that Ireland's ongoing active participation in a range of peacekeeping and crisis management missions is a key policy requirement. While each mission has elements of danger, it is the Government's position that all actions should be taken

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to minimise threats to the safety of personnel. Armoured vehicles provide essential force protection and, in this context in accordance with the equipment planning process, the fleet of armoured vehicles is subject to regular review to ensure that it meets operational requirements both at home and overseas.

Twenty four (24) 4 x 4 Armoured Utility Vehicles were acquired in late 2017. A multi-year mid-life upgrade of the Army's fleet of MOWAG Armoured Personnel Carriers is underway which will extend the utility of the fleet and provide greater levels of protection, mobility and firepower. To date, thirty eight (38) upgraded vehicles have been delivered, with the remainder due by early 2022. In addition in 2018 the Defence Forces took delivery of ten (10) new armoured logistic vehicles at a cost of €7.1m including VAT. These measures will provide essential force protection for personnel overseas.

There is focus on the essential force protection provided by armoured vehicles, and in this regard a requirement for additional 4x4 armoured utility vehicles has been identified and subject to consideration of a business case and assessment of associated cost, funding will be made available. At this time there are no plans for the purchase of 15 additional armoured logistic vehicles (described by the Deputy as combat support service armoured 8 x 8 drop vehicles) for the Defence Forces. As such, it is not possible to estimate accurately the cost of such vehicles in the absence of a relevant specification and market assessment which, as indicated, does not currently arise

I am satisfied that the Defence Forces have the necessary resources available to them, including a modern and effective range of equipment which is line with best international standards in order to fulfil all roles assigned to them by Government.

Departmental Properties

8. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence if the Napoleonic battery fortress on Carrig Island, Ballylongford, County Kerry was taken into the ownership of his Department after independence (details supplied) in view of the fact the land on which it is situated is not registered with the Property Registration Authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7316/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): I refer the Deputy to my response to Question No. 28 of 20 May 2020. As I outlined in reply to that question, 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, based on the properties listed in Folio KY21274, 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.

Overseas Missions

9. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence the status of efforts to return two members of the Defence Forces home (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7317/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): The Department

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and the Defence Forces are currently progressing options to repatriate 2 personnel deployed to the MONUSCO mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The personnel were due to complete their 6 months deployments in March/mid-April but were extended within the mission by a further month. This then brought them into the period when the UN suspended rotations in all UN missions due to the impact of the Covid-19 crisis. The rotation of these personnel was further extended by three months.

As the deployment of the personnel has been extended beyond their initial six month deployment, there is a requirement to extract them as soon as possible to allow for a medical assessment of the officers.

Given the urgency of the situation, both the Department and the Defence Forces are considering all available options to secure the return of these personnel at the earliest possible opportunity. However, there are a number of complexities that remain to be worked through, such as the transport of their weapons and ammunition.

My position is very clear on the matter; the timely extraction of these members of the Defence Forces should take precedence over any other secondary issue such as the treatment of weapons.

I acknowledge that the uncertainty around rotation dates is difficult for the individuals themselves and their families, and I would like to offer reassurance that my priority is the quick and safe return of these two officers.

Defence Forces Recruitment

10. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence if he will extend the deadline for applications for cadetships in the Defence Forces until September 2020 due to the Covid-19 restrictions. [7398/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): The Defence Forces continue to provide a broad range of response capabilities to the Primary Response Agencies (PRAs) during the Covid-19 pandemic, while also making provision for prudent and efficient workforce planning.

There are a broad range of considerations which must be factored into the timeline of the 2020 Cadet Competition and the planning and management of the assessments associated with each phase of the process.

In order to meet the timeline, it is necessary to close the competition on 31 May, and to proceed with the assessment phases.

Therefore, an extension of the application deadline is not under consideration at this time.

Candidates who are interested in a Cadetship in the Defence Forces are encouraged to apply via the Defence Forces website at www.military.ie by 31 May 2020.

Defence Forces Properties

11. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence his views on possible illegal activity at a location (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if he will make a

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statement on the matter. [7466/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): The Curragh is State land vested in the Minister for Defence, the main occupiers of which are the Defence Forces in the Curragh Camp, and the Curragh Racecourse, which leases a large tract of land from the Department of Defence. Most of the Curragh Plains are open and unfenced lands, and therefore easily accessible from local roads and the M7 and M9 motorways.

My Department is aware of an illegal encampment on the Curragh Plains. My Department and its Lands Management team are in ongoing communications with An Garda Síochána regarding the issue. The Deputy will appreciate it would not be appropriate for me to comment on operational matters currently being addressed by An Garda Síochána.

Defence Forces Personnel

12. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence his plans to support the need of members of the Defence Forces for secure long-term housing; if the matter will be addressed through local authority housing or council mortgages or by the Defence Forces directly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7638/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): The provision of local authority, social and/or affordable housing is a matter in the first instance for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government.

It has been a long standing established policy, since the late 1990's, to withdraw from the provision of housing quarters for Defence Forces personnel. This policy has been given effect on a gradual basis and long term accommodation is no longer provided.

Defence Forces Personnel

13. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence if the terms and conditions for re-enlistment to the Defence Forces enforce an obligation to purchase a discharge should a person that re-enlists decide to leave during the period of their contract; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7956/20]

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 terms and conditions, for this scheme were developed in consultation with the Representative Association, PDFORRA, and are available on the Defence Forces website, *military.ie*. 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.

Under the 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.

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I wish to confirm that, as provided for in the terms and conditions for the scheme, anyone who leaves of their own volition during the period of their enlistment of up to three years will not be required to make any payment in order to discharge. They may, however, incur a specific undertaking for any training provided during that period.

Air Corps

14. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence the level of capital investment underway and planned for the Air Corps; the aircraft being purchased; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7957/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): Some €216.2m (excluding VAT) is currently committed to the acquisition of six new aircraft to be provided to the Air Corps.

My priority as Minister with Responsibility for Defence is to ensure that the operational capability of the Defence Forces is maintained to the greatest extent possible so as to enable the Defence Forces to carry out their roles as assigned by Government. Capability equipment requirements are kept under on-going review in the light of present and expected operational needs.

The White Paper on Defence provides for the replacement of the current Air Corps Cessna fleet with three larger aircraft which will be equipped for Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR). Following an open tender competition, a contract was placed with Pilatus Aircraft Ltd in December 2017 at a cost of some €32m plus VAT for the provision of three PC-12 fixed wing utility aircraft suitably equipped for ISTAR tasks which will replace the Cessna FR 172H fleet. The contract is well underway and it is expected that the three aircraft will be delivered in 2020.

In March 2020, an additional Pilatus PC-12 NG aircraft was acquired at a cost of €4.2m plus VAT. This aircraft provides the Air Corps with immediate additional fixed wing capacity to meet the unique situation arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Deputy may wish to note that the White Paper also provides for the replacement of the two CASA 235 Maritime Patrol Aircraft with consideration of their replacement with larger more capable aircraft, which would enhance maritime surveillance and provide a greater degree of utility for transport and cargo carrying tasks. Following a tender competition a contract was awarded to Airbus Defence and Space in December 2019 for delivery of two C295 Maritime Patrol Aircraft in 2023 at a cost of some €180 plus VAT.

In accordance with the National Development Plan, the capital allocation for Defence has been increased to €113 million for 2020, an increase of €7 million on the 2019 NDP allocation. The NDP provides for a total of €541 million over the period 2018 to 2022. This level of capital funding will allow the Defence Organisation to continue the programme of sustained equipment replacement and infrastructural development across the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service as identified and prioritised in the Defence White Paper and builds on the significant investment programme over recent years. The replacement of the Air Corps Cessna aircraft and the CASA 235 Maritime Patrol Aircraft are among the projects included for funding.

Defence Forces Properties

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15. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence the status of progress on plans for a peace and leadership institute on the Curragh Camp, County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8082/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): The White Paper on Defence includes a commitment to evaluate the potential development of a new Institute for Peace Support and Leadership Training at the Defence Forces Training Centre in the Curragh, and in this regard a formal feasibility study was undertaken. An interim report was presented to the project steering group in November 2018. A draft final report is currently under consideration however current circumstances have delayed progress in this regard. It is expected that the report will be finalised later in the year and this will inform the next steps to be taken.

Schools Site Acquisitions

16. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Taoiseach and Minister for Defence the status of discussions between his Department and the Department of Education and Skills on a potential site for a new post-primary school for the Curragh; if he will provide clarity on this matter in order that a new site can be identified for the post-primary school either on the Curragh or elsewhere; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8083/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Paul Kehoe): As the Deputy will be aware the provision of schools and associated issues is, in the first instance, a matter for my colleague the Minister for Education and Skills. I can confirm that the Department of Education and Skills wrote to my Department enquiring as to the availability of a suitable site for the provision of a post-primary school from within the Department's property portfolio in South Kildare.

As the Curragh contains an operational military installation, officials from my Department have received a very detailed report from the military authorities on the wide-ranging implications of the request, and I am advised that my officials are currently considering the response received.

Question No. 17 answered with Question No. 6.

UN Security Council

18. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the status of Ireland's bid to win a seat at the United Nations Security Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7135/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland's candidature for election to the UN Security Council is a priority across the whole of Government. The UN is central to Ireland's foreign policy and our engagement in multilateralism receives strong political and public support. Our effort to secure a seat, following the announcement of our candidature in 2005, reflects this. I am particularly conscious that we are seeking a seat at a time when multilateralism is under pressure. It is my strong belief that, in these circumstances, it is important that Ireland should demonstrate its willingness to participate in the work of multilateral institutions. I know this view is widely shared across the Oireachtas.

The expected date of the election for the two available seats in the Western European and Others Group (WEOG) for the UN Security Council term 2021-2022 is 17 June. There has been

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no change in this date despite the COVID-19 related restrictions in place at the UN. While the arrangements for voting by representatives of Member States will have to be modified to take account of social distancing, it is the intention of the President of the General Assembly to proceed with the election on the planned date.

The contest for the two available seats is very competitive. Our competitors, Canada and Norway, are strong members of the UN and important bilateral partners. We enjoy excellent relations with both and cooperate on many issues at the UN and beyond.

In making our case to the 192 other Members States of the UN, we are highlighting our consistent record at the UN throughout more than six decades of active membership. We have a strong record at the UN in the areas of peacekeeping, sustainable development, humanitarian action, disarmament and human rights. Ireland last served on the Council from 2001-2002.

Throughout the campaign, there has been high level political engagement with the UN Member States to promote and discuss Ireland's candidature. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has been mobilised in support of the candidature, in coordination with other Departments as appropriate. These efforts will continue until the election is completed.

Covid-19 Pandemic

19. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his views on a matter regarding travel to China (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7158/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Officials in my Department are aware of the matter, and have been in touch with the representative of the persons involved. Information on the matter has been passed to the Consular Section of the Embassy of China in Dublin, which is best placed to deal with the situation.

Covid-19 Pandemic

20. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade when a further announcement will be made regarding extending and lifting the travel restrictions that are in place until 29 May 2020. [7289/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade continues to advise against any non-essential travel overseas until further notice.

This advice, which is available on our website and our TravelWise App, is taken in full consideration of public health requirements and in ongoing consultation with the Department of Health and the HSE. Working with our Embassies and Consulates overseas, we will continue to monitor developments closely and to consult with all relevant domestic and international partners regarding travel advice.

Brexit Issues

21. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if additional primary legislation is required in the event that the United Kingdom exits the transi-

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tion period under WTO terms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7339/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): As part of the Government's ongoing Brexit readiness work, consideration has been given to the potential need for further legislation in advance of the end of the transition period. Based on initial analysis, a number of Departments indicated that they will have requirements for legislative provisions.

Discussions are underway between these Departments, my Department, the Department of the Taoiseach, and the Office of the Attorney General on the most appropriate and effective way to take this forward.

The Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union (Consequential Provisions) Act 2019 (Brexit Omnibus Act) was signed into law on 17 March 2019. With very limited exceptions this specifically related to legislative measures required in the event of the UK leaving the EU without an EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement being concluded. As the Withdrawal Agreement has been concluded, legislative measures required for the end of the transition period will have to now be addressed.

Covid-19 Pandemic

22. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the efforts being made to prevent the outbreak of Covid-19 in Syria; the accountability mechanisms through which his Department ensures funding to the World Health Organization results in resources being allocated to those in Syria most in need and is not politically influenced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7362/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): COVID-19 is a global pandemic. However, the impact of the virus is likely to fall hardest on communities already experiencing humanitarian crises, displacement, or weak health systems.

The situation in Syria is particularly worrying. Nine years of civil war have decimated the country's health care system and left Syria poorly equipped to face COVID-19. Testing capacities are limited and there are significant shortages of personal protective equipment.

COVID-19 requires 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, 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. 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.

The majority of Ireland's funding to the WHO's COVID-19 appeal has been allocated at the global level, allowing the WHO to prioritise additional resources wherever needs are greatest. As with all humanitarian funding, Ireland and other donors insist that these resources are allocated on the basis of need alone, and in line with the humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality, neutrality and humanity. This means that in Syria, those in need should receive assistance, whether they are in Government or opposition controlled areas.

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As well as the additional needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is vital for donors to continue to support the millions of people who remain in need of humanitarian assistance, and those needs are acute in Syria. Ireland will provide over €24 million in humanitarian assistance in response to the Syria crisis in 2020. This will bring our overall contribution to more than €168 million since 2012, our largest response to any single crisis.

Passport Applications

23. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the position regarding renewing passports; if there are delays; the average waiting times; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7408/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): With the commencement of the COVID-19 public health emergency and the introduction of widespread travel restrictions both nationally and internationally, Irish citizens have ceased nearly all non-essential travel. This has led to a large decrease in the number of passport applications received by the Passport Service, including a decrease in applications received from applicants.

In response to this situation, the Passport Service is operating an essential, emergency service at this time. This 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. Almost 350 passports have issued to our citizens both at home and abroad in response to urgent requests. Our webchat service and a dedicated travel emergency mailbox continue to operate through which we can be contacted in such circumstances. In addition, our phones lines have answered over 16,000 calls from Irish citizens overseas as part of the Department's response to the COVID-19 crisis.

The Passport Service staff cannot work remotely, they must be on site in order to process passport applications. This is to protect the personal data of the applicant and the integrity of the Irish Passport System.

The Global Irish Services Division of the Department is now focused on returning to a point when we can provide a full passport service. We will endeavour to do so as quickly as possible, while providing our staff with a safe working environment and in line with the Government's Roadmap to reopen Ireland's economy and society. The protection of staff is our first priority but we also recognise that providing passports is an essential public service. I encourage Deputies to stay in contact with my office for updates in relation to the Passport Service.

Passport Applications

24. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the measures that will be implemented to ensure the backlog of passport applications is cleared promptly (details supplied). [7452/20]

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Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

25. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the percentage of the EU recovery fund that will be allocated to Ireland; the amount that will be allocated to each sector; and the sectors involved. [7635/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The COVID-19 crisis is of such a scale that no nation can successfully address it alone. In this spirit, the EU has engaged in a series of unprecedented measures to address the health and socio-economic consequences of the coronavirus crisis. The European Commission is expected to present proposals for a revised MFF and a Recovery Fund linked to the MFF shortly. This revised MFF with a Recovery Fund will be the fourth pillar of the EU's economic response to the pandemic. The first three pillars agreed by the Eurogroup and endorsed by the European Council on 23 April are the SURE guarantee for unemployment, the EIB guarantee fund for SMEs and ESM credit lines for Member States. At their meeting on 23 April, the European Heads of State and Government agreed to work towards establishing a Recovery Fund which "shall be of a sufficient magnitude, targeted towards the sectors and geographical parts of Europe most affected, and be dedicated to dealing with this unprecedented crisis".

In her speech to the European Parliament on 13 May, Commission President von der Leyen set out the Commission thinking on the Recovery Fund which suggests that recovery planning will need to include massive public and private investment at European and national level. The entirety of the Recovery Fund will be channelled through EU programmes, both new and existing programmes which work well. President von der Leyen has also been consulting with EU leaders, including the Taoiseach, on the proposed Recovery Fund. It is not clear at this stage

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exactly how the Recovery Fund will be allocated to the different Member States, including Ireland, or which precise sectors will be covered. However, in her speech to the Parliament, the Commission President indicated that the Fund would be channelled through 3 pillars: a new Recovery and Resilience tool, plus top-ups to Cohesion, allocated based on the severity of the economic and social impacts of the crisis; a strengthened InvestEU and a new Strategic Investment Facility; and strengthened key programmes to address the COVID-19 crisis as well as a new health programme.

France and Germany also made a joint proposal for the design of the Fund based on the Commission borrowing €500 billion raised using the EU budget. This is only one proposal for the Fund, but I note its importance. The European Commission is due to release new proposals on the EU recovery fund today (27 May 2020) which will provide more detail. We will engage positively with the Commission's proposals and work for early agreement.

Passport Applications

26. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade when the passport offices will recommence the processing of day-to-day passport applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7861/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): With the commencement of the COVID-19 public health emergency and the introduction of widespread travel restrictions both nationally and internationally, Irish citizens have ceased nearly all non-essential travel. This has led to a large decrease in the number of passport applications received by the Passport Service, including a decrease in applications received from applicants.

In response to this situation, the Passport Service is operating an essential, emergency service at this time. This 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.

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Covid-19 Pandemic

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27. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the travel advice for families that have booked holidays during the summer months in other EU countries; if families should seek a refund for such holidays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7902/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department is aware of the significant disruption that COVID-19 has caused for individuals and families in Ireland, including in relation to travel plans for the summer and beyond. The evolution of the pandemic and the restrictions put in place by Governments around the world have created a number of unique challenges in this regard.

As the Deputy will be aware, my Department issues Travel Advice to help citizens make informed decisions when planning a trip abroad and to offer an objective assessment of the risks they could face. This advice is based on close consultation with our domestic and international partners, and in full consideration of public health requirements. Issues relating to refunds or terms and conditions of flights, holiday packages or insurance policies are of course a matter for citizens to take up with their airline, tour operator or insurer.

The Department continues to advise against all non-essential travel overseas at this time. We remain in ongoing close consultation with relevant Departments, particularly the Department of Health and the HSE, regarding this advice.

Working with our Embassies and Consulates overseas, and with our international partners, we will continue to monitor developments closely.

Passport Services

28. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade when he plans to reopen the provision of passport services; the reason the matter was not considered a critical service due to the constitutional freedom to travel and the EU freedom of movement; if he is satisfied that all Irish citizens are being treated equally in terms of the freedom to travel based on whether they have a valid passport or require the consent of the passport office to a passport renewal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7903/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): With the commencement of the COVID-19 public health emergency and the introduction of widespread travel restrictions both nationally and internationally, Irish citizens have ceased nearly all non-essential travel. This has led to a large decrease in the number of passport applications received by the Passport Service, including a decrease in applications received from applicants.

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Military Aircraft

29. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the number of permits granted for military aircraft to land at Shannon Airport and to pass through Irish airspace between 1 January 2020 and 30 April 2020 inclusive; the countries the requests were made by; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8045/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): From 1 January 2020 to 30 April 2020, my Department granted diplomatic clearance for 126 landings at Shannon airport by foreign military aircraft. Of these, three were not availed of by the State concerned.

During the same period, permissions were granted for 253 overflights in Irish airspace by foreign military aircraft, of which six were not availed of by the State concerned.

The tables below detail the figures:

Military landing clearances for Shannon Airport from 01 January - 30 April 2020

Country	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
Egypt			1	
France		2	1	
Italy	1			
Palestine	2			
Russia			3	
UK				1
USA	48	33	27	7
Totals	51	35	32	8

Of these authorisations, three were not availed of.

Military overflight clearances from 01 January to 30 April 2020

Country	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
Australia	1			
Belgium	2			
Canada	1			
Colombia	1			
Congo			1	
Czech Republic	1			

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Country	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
Egypt	3	2	2	4
France	3	6	4	1
Germany	3	4	1	
Hungary	2	6		2
Italy		7	3	
Jordan	1	1	3	
Nigeria			1	
Qatar	3	4	2	8
Russia	1			
Serbia				1
Slovak Republic			2	
Switzerland		2		
Tunisia				1
USA	53	60	32	18
Totals	75	92	51	35

Of these authorisations to overfly, 6 were not availed of.

I have on previous occasions often set out the framework for these clearances, which remains unchanged. Foreign military aircraft, of any and all States, overflying Irish sovereign airspace or requesting permission to avail of facilities at any Irish airport, must routinely adhere to strict conditions, including that the aircraft is unarmed, carries no arms, ammunition or explosives; that it must not engage in intelligence gathering and does not form part of any military operation or exercise.

Covid-19 Pandemic

30. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade when he expects the authentications and-or apostilles in the public offices to reopen in Dublin and Cork in the context of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8054/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): As outlined in the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business published on 1 May 2020, public offices are expected to reopen in Phase 5, which will start on 10 August. This includes the Authentications and Apostilles Public Office of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The authentications office has been operating a limited postal-based service since restrictions were first announced as a result of the COVID19 crisis. This service has been operating on a three day a week basis, and will be expanded to a full five day a week basis from 2 June.

It is intended that the authentications office in Cork will operate a limited postal service from 8 June.

Northern Ireland

31. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and

Trade if he will continue to pursue the matter of EU immigration and family unification rights for Irish citizens living in Northern Ireland with the UK Government to ensure the same rights remain in place when the UK-EU settlement scheme ends in June 2021 in view of the successful outcome of a case by a person (details supplied). [8066/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Government welcomes the announcement by the British Government on changes to immigration rules for the individuals concerned, and others like them. This announcement - implementing a commitment by the British Government at the time of the New Decade New Approach agreement in January - is important progress and it is happening because of this individual's tireless campaign, which has come at considerable personal expense.

The people of Northern Ireland should never need to affirm or renounce British or Irish citizenship in order to access an entitlement based on the other – which is what the individual in question was asked to do.

The Citizenship and Identity provisions are central to the Good Friday Agreement and it is vital that they are upheld, and that the people of Northern Ireland can have full confidence in them. The Government has consistently engaged with the British Government in support of this, and we will continue to do so. Those provisions of course put obligations on both the British and Irish Governments.

We will continue to work, with the British Government, to enhance confidence in the effectiveness of these important provisions of the Good Friday Agreement.

Brexit has raised particular concerns for people in Northern Ireland on whether citizenship could create differential entitlements. The EU rights of Irish and therefore EU citizens from Northern Ireland are specifically addressed in the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland, which is an integral part of the Withdrawal Agreement. The Protocol confirms that Irish citizens in Northern Ireland, “will continue to enjoy, exercise and have access to rights, opportunities and benefits” that come with EU citizenship. Irish citizens will continue to have EU citizenship wherever they live. They will continue to enjoy the right to travel and live and work anywhere in the EU and the right not to be discriminated against on the grounds of nationality.

In March, the Joint Committee of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission published a paper on *‘Continuing EU Citizenship Rights, Opportunities and Benefits in Northern Ireland after Brexit’*.

That paper is a valuable contribution and the Government is giving careful consideration to it and the Joint Committee's views, as we would hope the British Government will do. In addition to the proposals in that paper, there may also be other options to consider on enhancing confidence in the effectiveness of these important provisions of the Good Friday Agreement.

Both Governments have committed to addressing issues relating to the Citizenship provisions of the Good Friday Agreement through the framework of the British Irish Intergovernmental Conference. The BIIGC is an important forum for taking these issues forward, and we will do so, informed by the Joint Committee's paper. Ireland will also play its role as an EU Member State in relation to the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Middle East Peace Process

32. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the extent to which efforts continue in the Middle Eastern peace process in particular with

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reference to the need for permanent structures to encourage progress in Gaza; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8118/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I have given a high priority to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and particularly the situation in the Gaza Strip, during my time as Minister. I have worked consistently to maintain an international focus on the issue and support for the two state solution and have undertaken four working visits to Israel and Palestine.

Ireland remains ready to support any peace initiative that respects the international parameters for a two-state solution and relevant UN Security Council Resolutions, and provides a basis to meet the aspirations of both peoples.

The Middle East Peace Process is regularly discussed in meetings of EU Foreign Ministers, and was addressed again in a Ministerial videoconference meeting on 15 May. 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, particularly on the matter of annexation. I welcome the very clear statements that have been made on the issue by EU High Representative/Vice President Josep Borrell.

Ireland has long worked to keep attention on Gaza. In my most recent visit to Gaza in December 2019, I saw for myself the impact the blockade is having. Ireland contributes humanitarian assistance to alleviate the worst of this suffering, including through our support for UNRWA, which is a key provider of public services, health and education in Gaza. I have initiated an Irish-funded solar power project in Gaza, which will help improve water quality in the area. More recently, my Department allocated additional funding to support the medical response to COVID 19 in the Gaza Strip.

However, the roots of the problem in Gaza are political and cannot be solved by funding alone. What is needed is the lifting of the blockade, so that normal life and normal economic activity can resume. Gaza faces other challenges, including oppressive rule by Hamas, but the blockade dominates peoples' lives in Gaza to such an extent that it is difficult to address other issues. I have raised the issue of the blockade with both Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

I will continue to make every effort to ensure that the Middle East Peace Process and the situation in Gaza remain high on the international agenda.

Passport Services

33. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade when the online processing of passports will recommence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8149/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): With the commencement of the COVID-19 public health emergency and the introduction of widespread travel restrictions both nationally and internationally, Irish citizens have ceased nearly all non-essential travel. This has led to a large decrease in the number of passport applications received by the Passport Service, including a decrease in applications received from applicants.

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Passport Data

34. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the waiting time for a new passport, a renewed passport online and offline, respectively; if the demand is still high from Irish citizens based in Great Britain and Northern Ireland in view of Brexit; and the impact Covid-19 restrictions has had on the waiting times. [8248/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): With the commencement of the COVID-19 public health emergency and the introduction of widespread travel restrictions both nationally and internationally, Irish citizens have ceased nearly all non-essential travel. This has led to a large decrease in the number of passport applications received by the Passport Service, including a decrease in applications received from applicants.

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Roadmap to reopen Ireland's economy and society. The protection of staff is our first priority but we also recognise that providing passports is an essential public service. I encourage Deputies to stay in contact with my office for updates in relation to the Passport Service.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

35. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the number of Irish citizens that are still abroad and seeking support for repatriation following the outbreak of Covid-19; the number of persons that were in financial difficulties that have received supports; and the supports received in funding from Europe for same. [8249/20]

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 our comprehensive approach 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 available or on chartered repatriation flights, if possible.

To date, my Department, including our Embassies and Consulates on the ground, have advised or assisted over 6,000 citizens to return safely to Ireland. We are in ongoing contact with approximately 1,000 citizens who remain overseas and are seeking assistance to return home.

A very small number of these citizens have received emergency financial assistance, to help with the costs of the flight or to cover basic requirements until the departure of the flight. The assistance was agreed in these few cases due to particularly exceptional and difficult circumstances, and on the basis of an undertaking to repay within six months.

Throughout the COVID crisis, we have worked in close consultation with EU partners bilaterally, and via the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the EU Directorate General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) mechanisms such as the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM). 627 Irish citizens have returned from 126 different locations on special repatriation flights organised by our partners, making use of the Union Civil Protection Mechanism under which up to 75% of the costs can be recouped. We chartered three special repatriation flights ourselves, from Peru, India and Nigeria, also making use of the Union Civil Protection Mechanism. A final figure is not yet available from the European Union on the total cost of this effort to bring our citizens home.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

36. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider rolling out the temporary wage subsidy scheme to all limousine SPSV owners and staff. [7271/20]

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 (The Act).

The underlying legislation and the TWSS itself were developed having regard to the Government objective of providing assistance to employers and employees, where businesses have been seriously affected by the Covid 19 pandemic and the restrictions which were introduced as a result. 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 sector to which the Deputy refers is no different in this regard.

Property Tax

37. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Finance if he is satisfied with the process in cases in which property owners that sell their homes must pay the local property tax for the full year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7326/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that liability for local property tax for a particular year is to be established on a single date. This is a statutory requirement contained in sections 3 and 16 of the Finance (Local Property Tax) Act 2012 (as amended). Section 2 of the Act defines the “liability date” of a given year as the 1 November of the preceding year.

Liability for Local Property Tax (LPT) arises where a person owns a residential property on a liability date, which for 2014 and subsequent years is 1 November. Thus, liability for the year 2020 was established on 1 November 2019 and the person who was the liable person in relation to a property on this date is required to pay the LPT liability for the full year 2020, regardless of whether the ownership of the property changes during that year and before the following liability date of 1 November 2020 (for the year 2021). However, while liability is to be established on 1 November in a year, the LPT does not have to be paid until the following year.

There are good reasons why liability is established before the start of the relevant year and why the tax charge is not apportioned over a year between two different owners where a property is sold during a year. Having a single liability date provides certainty about who is responsible for payment and avoids disputes about the number of days for which different property owners might be liable. The period between the liability date at the beginning of November and the end of a year, allows the taxpayer time to put different types of phased payment arrangements in place for the following year such as direct debit or deduction at source from a person’s salary or occupational pension.

In many cases where a property is being sold, the seller is also purchasing a replacement property around the same time. While such a person may end up having to pay LPT in respect of the property being sold, the LPT for the property being purchased is likely, depending on the date of sale, to end up being paid by the previous owner. The net result for each party to the sale is the payment of LPT on a single property. Furthermore, now that LPT has become an established tax it has become common practice, as part of sale/purchase negotiations, for sellers and purchasers of residential properties to take the ongoing LPT liability of the seller into account and to adjust the sales price accordingly so that, in effect, the purchaser ends up paying the LPT liability for the part of the year for which he or she owns the property.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

38. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Finance if changes will be made to the wage subsidy scheme in order to grant the payment to mothers on maternity leave and due to return to work in view of the fact those who were not on payroll in March 2020 are not entitled to the payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7352/20]

39. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Finance if changes have been or will be made to the wage subsidy scheme in order to grant the payment to mothers on maternity

leave and due to return to work in view of the fact those who were not on payroll in March 2020 are not entitled. [7353/20]

43. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Finance if women on maternity leave who are returning to work will be included on the Covid-19 temporary wage subsidy scheme. [7633/20]

51. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Finance if women returning from maternity leave are entitled to the temporary wage subsidy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7139/20]

56. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to amend the provisions of the wage subsidy scheme to allow women coming back from maternity leave to take part in the scheme. [7335/20]

70. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Finance if women returning from maternity leave will be eligible for the temporary wage subsidy scheme in cases in which it is relevant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7690/20]

79. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Finance if he will amend the temporary wage subsidy scheme to ensure that women returning from maternity leave are eligible for this payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7953/20]

86. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Finance if adjustments will be considered to the wage subsidy scheme to allow those returning from maternity leave to be included; if not, if alternative financial supports can be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8148/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 38, 39, 43, 51, 56, 70, 79 and 86 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 25 May, almost 56,300 employers and over 482,800 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.

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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 I have instructed officials to re-examine whether such workers may be accommodated at this time within the scheme.

Insurance Coverage

40. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance his views on a matter (details supplied) in relation to property insurance during Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7450/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I appreciate that many people with premises due to re-open in the current environment have genuine concerns regarding whether they will have insurance cover for claims relating to COVID-19, including those involved in tourism such as guesthouses or other forms of accommodation. Whether a person's property insurance provides cover for such claims will depend on the specifics of his/her insurance policy, and it is possible that some policies may cover such claims, but it is also likely that others will not. In addition, on renewal it is possible that many insurers will change their terms and conditions to exclude any claims for COVID-19. It should be noted however that neither I, nor the Central Bank, have any influence over the decisions of insurers in relation to the provision of such cover.

With regards to the Deputy's point that individuals may claim against property owners if they allege that they have contracted COVID-19 on their property, the only comment I would make is that it may be difficult to prove where a person caught the virus in the first place, therefore taking such actions may not be straightforward, and even if initiated, there can be no guarantee of a successful outcome. For now, I believe that the best way that a business can protect itself from litigation is to follow public health guidelines and implement social distancing measures.

I am aware that there have been some suggestions that the State should provide an indemnity to re-opening businesses for COVID-19 claims in circumstances where they have not been able to get any insurance cover. However, I believe that it would be financially unsustainable for the State to provide such a blanket indemnity for all litigation relating to COVID-19 outbreaks, there would also be a significant moral hazard in doing so and could also be wider unintended consequences in the insurance market.

Finally, I would like to assure the Deputy that my Department will continue to be as proactive as it can be on insurance issues and will continue to liaise with the Central Bank of Ire-

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land, Insurance Ireland and the sector on an ongoing basis.

Tax Credits

41. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Finance if childminders will continue to be able to access the childminders tax credit if they provide care in the home of the child on a temporary basis as a result of Covid-19 restrictions. [7609/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Childcare services relief is an income tax exemption that is available to individuals who provide childminding services in their own homes. The legislation dealing with the relief is contained in section 216C of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997.

In order to qualify for the relief, the individual providing the childminding services must –

- not receive more than €15,000 income per annum from the childminding activity,
- provide the service in their own home,
- not mind more than three children, who are under the age of 18 years, at any one time (this number does not include any child residing in the individual's home), and
- be self-employed and registered for self-assessment with Revenue.

If another individual provides childcare services in the same home, the €15,000 income limit is divided between them.

Childcare workers who mind the children of healthcare and other essential workers are themselves essential workers. The HSE's guidance provides that such childminding should only be done in the home of the child, rather than in the home of the carer. Revenue advises me that where, in line with HSE guidance, childminding services are provided in the home of the child rather than in the home of the carer, relief will still be available during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Revenue have also confirmed that the limit of three children will not apply where the individual is only caring for children who normally reside in the home concerned. Further information is being published on the Revenue website.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

42. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Finance if he has considered extending the temporary wage subsidy scheme for the tourism and hospitality sector in view of the long-term impacts of Covid-19 for these businesses. [7612/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is an economy-wide scheme that was introduced on 26 March 2020 to provide income support to eligible employees where the employer's business activities have been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am aware of the concerns raised regarding the impact of COVID-19 on individual sectors of the economy and I note the some concerns have been raised regarding the pace of recovery for some sectors in particular.

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However, I would also note that the reality of COVID-19 is that our whole economy and labour market have been rapidly transformed by this unprecedented shock and many important sectors have also been negatively impacted.

The objective of the TWSS is to maintain the link between the employer and employee, affording the employee the security of a job during and after the crisis as best we can, as well as enabling the business to help employers scale back up their business after the scheme has ended.

The ongoing economic impact will continue to be monitored closely, as will the recovery as we continue lift the COVID-19 restrictions.

Question No. 43 answered with Question No. 38.

Vehicle Registration

44. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Finance when he expects vehicle registration tax centres to reopen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7974/20]

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.

Tourism Industry

45. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider measures (details supplied) to bolster the tourism sector. [8026/20]

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.

In respect of the proposals made by France and Germany, they are an important contribution and a step in the right direction on Europe's recovery efforts. They are proposals from two Member States - we are assessing the detail of these proposals along with input from other Member States. Agreement on a way forward will require the approval of all 27 Member States.

Ireland will continue to engage positively in the MFF and recovery plan discussions and

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work with Member States and the institutions to build consensus for early agreement. There are issues and matters, including those raised in the French and German proposals, that need careful consideration to assess the implications for Ireland. It will not be until then that we will fully know the specifics of the extent to which and how Member States can avail of funding from the MFF and the Recovery Fund.

Primary Medical Certificates

46. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Finance if the criteria for the primary medical certificate will be reviewed and qualification criteria eased; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8029/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) Scheme provides relief from VAT and VRT (up to a certain limit) on the purchase of an adapted car for transport of a person with specific severe and permanent physical disabilities, payment of a Fuel Grant, and an exemption from Motor Tax.

To qualify for the Scheme an applicant must be in possession of a Primary Medical Certificate. To qualify for a Primary Medical Certificate, an applicant must satisfy one of the following conditions:

- be wholly or almost wholly without the use of both legs;
- be wholly without the use of one leg and almost wholly without the use of the other leg such that the applicant is severely restricted as to movement of the lower limbs;
- be without both hands or without both arms;
- be without one or both legs;
- be wholly or almost wholly without the use of both hands or arms and wholly or almost wholly without the use of one leg;
- have the medical condition of dwarfism and have serious difficulties of movement of the lower limbs.

The Scheme represents a significant tax expenditure. Between the Vehicle Registration Tax and VAT foregone, and the fuel grant, the scheme cost €65m in each of 2016 and 2017, €70m in 2018 and €72m in 2019. This figure does not include the revenue foregone in respect of the relief from Motor Tax, which is also available to those who avail of the Scheme.

I understand and sympathise with any person who suffers from a serious physical disability and can't access the scheme under the current criteria. However, given the scope and scale of the scheme, any possible changes to it can only be made after careful consideration, taking into account the existing and prospective cost of the scheme as well as the availability of other schemes which seek to help with the mobility of disabled persons, and the interaction between each of these schemes.

Accordingly, I have no plans to amend the qualifying medical criteria for the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers Scheme at this time.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

47. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Finance his views on adjusting the calculation for Covid-19 wage subsidy to be based on annual average wages to compensate for seasonal variations in income for some professions. [8212/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) was legislated for in section 28 of the recently enacted Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020.

Deputies will be aware that the TWSS is an emergency measure to deal with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy.

Of necessity, the underlying legislation and the scheme itself were developed really quickly, having regard to the urgent Government 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.

It must be accepted that the TWSS cannot be adapted to meet the particular circumstances of individual employers or employees.

In the context of the compelling need for immediate implementation of the TWSS, the scheme necessarily had to build on data returned to Revenue through its real-time PAYE system. The key conditions 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 before, in general, 15 March 2020, but extended recently to 1 April 2020.

The latter two conditions were particularly designed with a view to preventing abuse of the scheme and there are no plans for these to be revisited at present.

Health Insurance

48. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Finance his views on allowing tax relief on private health insurance for dental treatments to help stimulate the sector when the emergency has passed. [7052/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The position is that tax relief is available already for dental treatment as set out beneath.

Section 470 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 provides for income tax relief, at the standard rate, to individuals who pay for medical insurance to an approved insurer.

Qualifying medical insurance policies can be for health insurance, dental insurance and health and dental insurance combined.

The relief is given as a discount on the cost of the policy, regardless of whom the policy is for. This is known as tax relief at source (TRS). In respect of a policy taken out for an adult, the relief available is equal to the lesser of either: 20% of the cost of the policy or 20% of €1,000 (equal to a credit of €200). In respect of a policy taken out for a child, relief available is equal to the lesser of either: 20% of the cost of the policy or 20% of €500. For the purposes of this relief, a child is any individual under 21 years of age.

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Tax Reliefs Application

49. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Finance his views on directing the Revenue Commissioners to amend the terms of the MED 2 scheme to allow relief at the marginal rate for the remainder of 2020. [7053/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Tax relief in respect of health expenses is provided for under section 469 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997. Section 469 defines “health expenses” as “expenses in respect of the provision of health care including the services of a practitioner”.

For the purposes of Section 469, health care does not include routine dental treatment. Where an individual incurs health expenses in relation to non-routine dental treatment, a Form MED 2 must be completed and certified by the Dental Practitioner who performs any of the qualifying treatments outlined on the form. Tax relief is provided for at the standard rate.

There are no immediate plans to provide for tax relief in respect of non routine dental treatment at the marginal rate. In this regard, it should be borne in mind that the provision of tax relief at the standard rate ensures that all taxpayers are treated equally regardless of whether they pay tax at the standard or higher rate.

Tax Reliefs Eligibility

50. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Finance further to Parliamentary Question No. 124 of 17 December 2019, if further consideration has been given to enhanced or expanded tax relief or other forms of incentives on teleconferencing equipment with the objective of reducing emissions by minimising unnecessary travel to meetings in view of recent developments and changes in the way in which society works in terms of employment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7062/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As I indicated to the Deputy in the question to which he refers, it is established Government practice to use exemptions or incentives in the tax system in limited circumstances where there are demonstrable market failures and where a tax-based incentive is more efficient than a direct expenditure intervention.

Despite the recent developments brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, it is not clear that the circumstances indicate that an intervention specifically in relation to teleconferencing equipment would be appropriate.

That said, I am advised by Revenue that an annual allowance (known as a wear and tear allowance) is available for capital expenditure incurred on the provision of machinery or plant for business purposes. The allowances are granted at a rate of 12.5% per annum over 8 years. The item of plant or machinery must be in use at the end of the period for which the allowance is being claimed. Expenditure incurred on teleconferencing equipment would be eligible for the allowance provided such equipment is used for business purposes.

Question No. 51 answered with Question No. 38.

Wage Subsidy Scheme

52. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address a matter

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raised in correspondence (details supplied) in relation to the temporary wage subsidy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7272/20]

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 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.

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 that the purpose and objective of the scheme is 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.

I am advised by Revenue that, in terms of any particular extenuating circumstances that may apply in a specific case, and 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.

I have been further advised by Revenue that contact was made with the agent for the specific case concerned in this instance, arising from which it has been confirmed to the agent that that access to the TWSS is now available, on a forward going basis, for the case concerned.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

53. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Finance if there is an obligation under

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the temporary wage subsidy scheme on employers to pay employees if the employees have returned to work as certain restrictions are lifted (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7292/20]

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. In the context of the need for immediate implementation of the TWSS, the scheme necessarily had to build on data returned to Revenue through its real-time PAYE system.

The key conditions 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 before, in general, 15 March 2020, although this was extended recently to 1 April 2020.

The latter two conditions were particularly designed with a view to preventing abuse of the scheme.

The TWSS is predicated on the employer wanting to keep the employees on the payroll and to retain them until business picks up and 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. 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 due to the restrictions brought in by the Government or has continued to trade with employees continuing to work part-time or work full time with similar hours as before the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, the scheme has no role in relation to the employer/employee relationship in so far as terms, conditions and entitlements of the employment are concerned.

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 system reasons, the employer will need to enter at least €0.01 in Gross Pay when running its payroll.

The question of an individual's entitlements in an employment context following his or her resumption of duty after a period of leave, whether paid or unpaid, and the question of what wages an employer may or may not be in a position to pay such an employee in the light of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the employer's business, are matters that are outside the remit of the TWSS.

Insurance Industry

54. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Finance the details of his discussions and conclusions made with the insurance industry on compensating businesses with disruption cover for infectious diseases on the need to honour business interruption claims; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7312/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am aware that there have been many

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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.

I and my officials have been engaging with the 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 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 Deputy should note that the Central Bank of Ireland (CBI) 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.

The CBI 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, I have set out already 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 CBI’s Consumer Protection Code. However, I cannot compel insurers to pay business interruption claims and 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 appropri-

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ate channels for resolving them must be followed i.e. bringing the matter to the attention of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman or seeking to go down the litigation route. In this regard, I note that a number of legal actions have been initiated by some publicans. Notwithstanding these constraints, my officials are maintaining regular contact with Insurance Ireland on this and other issues and are keeping me updated on developments. Furthermore, I have also recently indicated in the Dail, that I intend engaging again directly with Insurance Ireland in the near future.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

55. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied) relating to the temporary wage subsidy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7328/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Deputy will be aware that the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) was legislated for in section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 and that the TWSS is an emergency measure to deal with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy. Of necessity, the underlying legislation and the scheme itself were developed quickly, having regard to the Government objective of getting assistance to employers and employees, where businesses have been seriously affected by the pandemic and the necessary restrictions introduced in response to this Public Health emergency.

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. A key element of the eligibility is that the employees were on the payroll at 29 February 2020. This requirement together with the other eligibility requirements for the TWSS were particularly designed as safeguards against abuse of the scheme.

Accordingly, the TWSS can only operate in respect of an employee, whether full-time or part-time, who was on the payroll of the relevant employer as at 29 February 2020. Craft Apprentices alternate between ‘on-the-job’ training with an employer and ‘off-the-job training’ in an education centre. The employer pays the Apprentice while she/he is being trained ‘on-the-job’ and a training allowance is paid through the Education Shared Business Services Unit of the Department of Education and Skills while the Apprentice is attending ‘off-the-job’ training.

Eligible employers can participate in the scheme in respect of any eligible Apprentice who was on the payroll at 29 February 2020. Apprentices who were not on the payroll of the employer at 29 February 2020 are not eligible employees for the purposes of the TWSS. Furthermore, the wage subsidy per employee is calculated based on the net pay reported by the employer for January and February 2020. The scheme does not distinguish between periods in ‘off-the-job’ training where the Apprentice was not in receipt of a wage from the employer and was not therefore reported on the payroll of the employer and so from an operational standpoint the employer would have no basis period on which to base the wage subsidy. Accordingly, the TWSS can only operate in respect of an Apprentice, who is on the payroll of the employer as at 29 February 2020.

The question of an individual’s entitlements in an employment context following his or her resumption of duty after a period of training, and the question of what wage amount an employer may or may not be in a position to pay such an Apprentice in the light of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the employer’s business, are matters that are outside the remit of

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the TWSS. Those employees who are laid off following such a resumption of duty would be entitled to claim the Pandemic Unemployment Payment from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

Question No. 56 answered with Question No. 38.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

57. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether finance packages are needed for businesses (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7346/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Deputy suggests extending the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) to a particular business sector.

The TWSS is provided for in section 28 of the recently enacted Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 (The Act). The underlying legislation and the scheme itself were developed having regard to the Government objective of providing assistance to employers and employees, where businesses have been seriously affected by the Covid 19 pandemic and the restrictions which were introduced as a result. 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 sector to which the Deputy refers is no different in this regard.

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 objective 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 the crisis has passed.

A key eligibility criterion for the scheme requires that where a business is experiencing a significant negative economic disruption due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the employer must make a declaration which states that, based on reasonable projections, as a result of disruption to the business caused (or to be caused) by the Covid-19 pandemic, there will be a decline of at least 25% in the future turnover of, or customer orders for, the business for the duration of the pandemic; and that as a result the employer cannot pay normal wages and outgoings fully, but nonetheless wants to retain its employees on the payroll.

An employer that has been hit by a significant decline in business but has strong cash reserves, which are not required to fund debt, may still qualify for the scheme, but the Government would expect such an employer to continue to pay some element of employees' wages. Thus, where a business has been forced to close due to public health requirements resulting in future turnover declining by at least 25%, it is expected that such an employer would be eligible for the TWSS.

The Deputy may also wish to note that, outside of the TWSS, there is a wide range of financial supports and guidance available to help businesses impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Details are available at the following link:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c644c0-supports-for-businesses-impacted-by-covid-19/>

58. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Finance the supports being put in place for professionals such as dentists that are often sole traders, many of whom have had no income or business since mid-March 2020 due to a lack of PPE; if the Revenue Commissioners will withhold tax bills from dentists for the time being; if supports can be provided to get such businesses back open; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7350/20]

88. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Finance if he will temporarily suspend the collection of professional withholding tax from payments made to dentists contracted by the HSE and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to treat medical card and PRSI-eligible patients, respectively. [8199/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 58 and 88 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, which has been extended to include the May/June 2020 VAT period and May and June 2020 PAYE (Employer) liabilities. These arrangements are available to all businesses experiencing tax payment difficulties as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, including professionals such as dentists who have been unable to trade due to Covid-19. However, the VAT measure would not be relevant to dentists, whose activity is exempt from VAT (under Schedule 1 Paragraph 2(5) of the Value-Added Tax Consolidation Act 2010).

These measures are currently being operated by Revenue on an administrative basis. Legislation will be introduced in due course to put the scheme on a statutory footing and to provide for a reduced statutory interest rate that will apply to payment of the warehoused debts:

- 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 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 warehousing measures currently operated by Revenue on an administrative basis, as well as the reduced statutory interest rate, are important support measures aimed at assisting all businesses, including dentists and other sole traders, who have been adversely affected by Covid-19.

Where a dentist or other professional is an employer, s/he may have availed of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) to make payments to employees. This was provided for in section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020. The TWSS builds on data returned to Revenue through its real-time PAYE system. The core principles of the scheme are that:

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

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

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

As regards the personal tax liability of dentists or other self-employed individuals, a self-assessed income taxpayer is required to pay preliminary tax by 31 October in a year, or later if paying online via the Revenue Online Service (ROS). The amount of the payment is

- 90% of the current year's liability;

- 100% of the prior year's liability; or

- 105% of the tax due for the tax year preceding the immediately previous tax year (often called the 'pre-preceding year').

The "pre-preceding year" option only applies to taxpayers paying by direct debit. Taxpayers not paying by direct debit can choose the lower of the other two options; in most cases 90% of this year's liability is likely to be considerably less than the previous year's liability.

In addition, Revenue has confirmed that, to accelerate interim refunds of Professional Services Withholding Tax (PSWT) during the Covid-19 pandemic, they will accept refund claims via MyEnquiries where legible copies of the original F45 and F50 documents are attached.

Full details are available at <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/communications/covid19/revenue-services.aspx>

Finally, sole traders may be eligible to apply to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection for the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment scheme.

Revenue Commissioners Staff

59. Deputy Dessie Ellis asked the Minister for Finance if the number of staff dealing with customers experiencing difficulties contacting the Revenue Commissioners regarding tax queries will be increased; if the tax office is taking telephone queries at this time; the measures that can be put in place to improve the response time for queries submitted online through the Revenue website; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7375/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that its telephone helpline services are currently curtailed due to the COVID-19 related restrictions. Further information regarding these services is available on Revenue's website at link www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/communications/covid19/revenue-services, which may be of assistance to the Deputy.

Revenue is, however, continuing to provide a full service in respect of customer enquiries received via its on-line 'MyEnquiries' system and through the normal postal service, and has

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deployed additional resources to ensure such queries are replied to in as short a turnaround time as possible. For example, Revenue is currently receiving between 4,000 and 5,000 PAYE related enquiries per day of which almost 50% are replied to on a next day basis while the remainder are dealt with well within its customer service standards.

If the Deputy is aware of a specific case that is experiencing difficulties, he should provide Revenue with the details as soon as possible so that contact can be made, and the issue rectified. The Deputy can make direct contact with Revenue via the Oireachtas Helpline at telephone number (01)- 8589999. The Helpline operates between 09:30am and 05.00pm, Monday to Friday, and operates a voicemail service for out of hours calls.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

60. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider reviewing the rules regarding accessing the temporary wage subsidy scheme (details supplied); and if the Revenue Commissioners can be given some leniency in this regard in order to deal with businesses on a case-by-case basis. [7378/20]

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 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 at 29 February 2020 and that the employer had fulfilled its PAYE reporting obligations for February 2020 before, in general, 15 March 2020. The latter two requirements in particular were critical safeguards against abuse 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 purpose and objectives of the scheme, Revenue announced on 24 April 2020, under its care and management provisions, that it would 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 Covid-19 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. These revised arrangements cannot be made retrospective. Where a business fails to meet the revised qualifying criteria for TWSS but wishes to further engage with Revenue on the matter, it must provide supporting evidence setting out the rationale for why it should be included in the scheme. This supporting documentation should be provided via Revenue's myEnquiries system.

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As I have indicated, the PAYE reporting obligations built into the eligibility criteria for the TWSS were designed in particular to prevent abuse of the scheme. It is not proposed to make any further concessions in relation to compliance with those reporting requirements for the purposes of qualification for the scheme.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

61. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Finance his views on ensuring that employers availing of the wage subsidy scheme raise their employees' wages up to 100% of their gross pay instead of their net pay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7383/20]

65. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether employers availing of the temporary wage subsidy scheme should match employees' gross pay instead of net pay rate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7583/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 61 and 65 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. In the context of the compelling need for immediate implementation of the TWSS, the scheme necessarily had to build on data returned to Revenue through its real-time PAYE system.

The key prescribed conditions of the scheme are that –

- the business is suffering significant negative economic impact due to the pandemic and is unable to pay normal wages to employees, but wishes to continue to employ the employees and is making best efforts to continue to pay some wages to the employees,

- the employees were on the payroll at 29 February 2020, and

- the employer had fulfilled its PAYE reporting obligations for February 2020 before, in general, 15 March 2020, but recently extended to before the 1 April 2020.

The latter two conditions were particularly designed with a view to preventing abuse of the scheme.

The amount of the temporary wage subsidy payable in relation to eligible employees is based on the average net weekly pay reported for January and February 2020 for each employee.

I clarified in my letter of 16 April 2020 to Revenue, which set out my determinations of the amounts of wage subsidy to be payable in relation to different classes of employees, that for the purposes of the operation of the TWSS, the Average Revenue Net Weekly Pay is the employee's average net weekly pay for January and February 2020 based on the payroll submissions made by the employer concerned to Revenue. It is a matter for each employer concerned to decide what amount of normal wages should be paid to employees in addition to the wage subsidy amounts, and whether to try match the employees' previous gross or net pay. Ultimately, what employees are most concerned about is how near the aggregate of the wage subsidy amount plus whatever amount of normal wages is being paid net to them by employers is to their normal take home pay.

Revenue has confirmed that it has now implemented the revised rates of wage subsidy as determined by me on 16 April 2020, with the remainder to be implemented shortly. The revised rates apply as respects payroll notifications received by Revenue on or after 4 May 2020

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in respect of payroll runs to be made on or after that date. The revised rate now implemented include:

- the 85% subsidy rate for employees whose average net weekly pay does not exceed €412,
- non-tapering of the 85% subsidy where an employer contribution of more than 15% of the employees net weekly pay results in a salary payment of up to €350 per week,
- the flat rate subsidy of up to €350 for employees whose average net weekly pay is more than €412 but less than €500,
- the 70% subsidy rate for employees whose average net weekly pay is more than €500 but less than €586, with a maximum subsidy of €410 applying,
- a maximum payment of €350 per week for employees whose average net weekly pay is greater than €586 per week but not more than €960 per week, subject to specific tapering reductions based on the employer contribution to the net weekly earnings.

Finally, it is important to note that the TWSS is operated in real-time by employers through the normal payroll process. To ensure that subsidy amounts are paid to employees on a timely basis as part of the relevant payroll run, it is necessary to calculate the amount of the subsidy due to an employee based on the employee's gross pay. This is necessary as an employee's net pay cannot be fully determined before the actual payroll is run. Revenue is aware that, in effect, this means that for some employees where the employer pays between (net weekly) €586 and €960, the full amount of the subsidy due to an employee may not be paid through the payroll run concerned. However, Revenue has confirmed it will be implementing a system development to ensure that any subsidy amounts that remain due to such employees will be calculated, by Revenue, following the submission of the actual payroll or payrolls. Arrangements will then be made by Revenue to pay any outstanding subsidy amount directly to the employees concerned. The necessary system development to achieve this will be implemented shortly and will be applied retrospectively from 4 May 2020 to any impacted weekly, fortnightly or monthly paid employees.

Credit Unions

62. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Finance if an impact assessment has been carried out on the status of credit unions here in view of the Covid-19 pandemic; the supports that can be offered to credit unions; his views on the future of credit unions here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7426/20]

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 since the beginning of the COVID-19 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 repre-

Questions - Written Answers

sentative 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 approximately one third of the consumer credit market and are well positioned to provide access to credit to support the recovery from the current crisis.

In terms of the overall financial position of the sector, credit unions have come into this crisis with a strong reserves position, with a sector average reserve ratio of 16% as at 31 December 2019. This highlights that many individual credit union boards have chosen to prudently maintain additional reserves over the 10% regulatory minimum requirement. Credit unions have also maintained high levels of liquidity, with a sector average liquidity ratio of 39% as at 31 December 2019. Notwithstanding the strong financial position of the sector at December 2019, sustainability is a challenge for many credit unions.

Generally speaking, the current business model of Irish credit unions is suffering from low growth rates in loan demand over recent years (outpaced by stronger savings growth). Surplus funds not lent out to members are appropriately not exposed to undue risk, and they yield limited investment returns reflective of the current low interest rate environment. The operational business model lacks scale efficiencies and suffers from high operating costs. This has translated into low loan to asset ratios (sector average 28%), low return on assets (sector average 0.6%) and high cost income ratios (sector average 82%).

The economic outlook arising by virtue of COVID-19, including reduced demand for new lending, has increased the challenges the sector is already facing. 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.

Home Building Finance Ireland

63. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Finance the number of applications for loans to Home Building Finance Ireland since its establishment; the number of loan approvals; the number of loan drawdowns; the cash value of the applications, approvals and drawdowns; and the number of units of accommodation involved in the applications, approvals and drawdowns to date. [7446/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The details sought by the Deputy are set out in the following table for the period 28 January 2019 to 19 May 2020.

In relation to the cash value and the number of units of accommodation identified at the applications stage, for a variety of reasons these numbers can vary significantly from the applications finally considered by HBFi and therefore I am advised by HBFi they are not in a position to provide these numbers as they could be considered as a comparator to the approved numbers when in many cases they will not accurately represent the final application considered.

-	Data for the period 28/01/2019 to 19/05/2020
Number of Applications for loans	70

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-	Data for the period 28/01/2019 to 19/05/2020
Number of Loan Approvals	23
Number of Loan Drawdowns	7 drawn loans (36 individual drawdown requests within these 7 loans)
Cash Value of Approvals	€134m*
Cash Value of Drawdowns	€12m*
Number of units involved in the Approvals	743
Number of units involved in the Draw-downs	247 units either under construction or already completed (based on the 7 drawn loans)

* Rounded to the nearest million

Vehicle Registration Tax

64. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Finance when VRT applications will commence. [7535/20]

69. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider allowing a company (details supplied) to reopen immediately. [7678/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 64 and 69 together.

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.

Question No. 65 answered with Question No. 61.

Banking Sector

66. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the measures he will take to ensure that banks which offered term extensions to loans, including mortgages, will not add penalties or recapitalisation or accruals but will resume the exact same repayments pre-Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7665/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy will be aware, An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar T.D. and I, along with the Minister for Business, Enterprise & Innovation, Heather Humphreys T.D., met with the Chief Executives of the five Irish major retail banks earlier this month.

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. Last month, the members of the Banking and Payments Federation Ireland (BPFII) announced their intention to extend these payment breaks to six months for households and businesses which require it.

The Central Bank is focused on ensuring that extensions to COVID-19 related payment breaks operate in borrowers' best interests and in line with regulatory requirements. Payment breaks give customers the opportunity to postpone or reduce their repayments on their mortgage, personal or business loans, providing breathing space for borrowers from the severe income shock many households and businesses are experiencing.

The Central Bank has clearly communicated and agreed with the BPFII that it expects that at the end of the agreed payment break that borrowers who can return to full repayments be given, at the minimum, the option to either repay the loan within the remaining term or extend the term of the loan, without penalties noting that borrower circumstances and the appropriateness of each option may differ. These options may result in an increase in monthly repayments due to the overall increase in the cost of credit and this should be fully explained to the borrower. Consumers can also find more information on payment breaks at the Central Bank's Covid – 19 Hub.

Banking Sector

67. Deputy Catherine Murphy asked the Minister for Finance the communication there has been with a bank (details supplied); when it will be possible to recommence valuations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7666/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I have not had any communication with the bank referred to by the Deputy in relation to the carrying out of property valuations.

It should be noted that the European Union (Consumer Mortgage Credit Agreements) Regulations 2016 (SI 142 of 2016) places certain requirements on mortgage lenders in relation to the standards of, and used by, property appraisers when carrying out a property valuation for mortgage lending purposes. For example, lenders are required that to ensure that appraisers conducting property valuations are professionally competent, use reliable standards and are sufficiently independent from the credit underwriting process so that they can provide an impartial and objective valuations.

Within this overall financial services legal requirement in relation to property valuation for mortgage lending purposes, it can also be noted that the Regulations which set out the temporary Covid-19 public health restrictions (SI 121 of 2020) recognise that financial, insurance and banking services provided by a financial services provider is an essential service, and that such services which are necessary to support any other essential service, including the provision of key third party supports provided under contract to a person providing an essential service, also constitutes an essential service.

The Government has now published a roadmap for the re-opening of society and business, with phase one now in operation. In relation to the roll out of the further phases and the resumption of further economic activity, the Government will keep all relevant issues under continuous review and when it makes it further decisions it will have full regard to the public health advice

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and also have regard to other important social and economic considerations.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

68. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Finance if a person (details supplied) is eligible to avail of the wage subsidy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7669/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) was introduced by the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020. This scheme provides the payment of income supports to employers in respect of eligible employees where the employer's business activities have experienced significant negative disruption due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The TWSS is operated by employers through their payroll system, thereby ensuring employees will be in receipt of the subsidy payment along with any other payments made by their employer. The employer must include the subsidy as part of employees' wages and show the amount of the subsidy paid to the employee on the employee's payslip.

The key eligibility criteria for 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 were included on a payroll submission in February 2020, and
- the employer had fulfilled its PAYE reporting obligations for February 2020 by 1 April 2020.

I am advised by Revenue that in relation to the person in respect of whom details are supplied, it is a matter for that person's employer to apply for the TWSS for this person through the submission of the employer's payroll to Revenue. In applying for the TWSS for this and other employees it is important that the PRSI Class J9 be used on the payroll submission for all employees for whom the TWSS is being sought.

An employer is required to issue a pay slip to each employee for each pay period. The employer is required to separately disclose the amount of the subsidy payment and any additional payment paid by the employer to the employee on the face of the pay slip document. The employee can verify each payment made by the employer by reference to the pay slip document issued by the employer.

I am advised that Revenue has attempted to contact the person whose details were supplied by the Deputy and will continue to do so. The person can, if they wish, provide Revenue with a copy of their payslips for past pay periods and other relevant details to assist with the review procedures being undertaken by Revenue in this case.

Question No. 69 answered with Question No. 64.

Question No. 70 answered with Question No. 38.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

71. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance the status of arrears owed to employ-

ers under the TWSS relating to employees that were rehired since 1 May 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7725/20]

76. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if an employer that laid off a worker onto the pandemic unemployment payment can rehire that employee under the temporary wage subsidy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7891/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 71 and 76 together.

The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) was is provided for in section 28 of the recently enacted Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020.

The TWSS is an emergency measure to deal with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy. Of necessity, the underlying legislation and the scheme itself were developed quickly, having regard to the Government objective of providing assistance to employers and employees, where businesses have been seriously affected by the pandemic and the necessary restrictions introduced as a result of this Public Health emergency.

It must be accepted that the TWSS cannot be adapted to meet the particular circumstances of individual employers or employees. The objective of the scheme is to ensure the key relationship between employers and employees is maintained to the greatest extent possible so that businesses can restart operations once the crisis has passed.

In the context of the need for immediate implementation of the TWSS, the scheme necessarily had to build on data returned to Revenue through its real-time PAYE system. The key conditions 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 before, in general, 15 March 2020, although this deadline was extended recently to 1 April 2020.

The latter two conditions were particularly designed with a view to preventing abuse of the scheme.

Accordingly, it follows that 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. Eligible employers can participate in the scheme in respect of any eligible employees on their payroll, including rehired staff who were temporarily laid off. Where an eligible employee previously laid off has been re-hired, the employee will qualify for the scheme once their claim for social welfare benefit (Pandemic Unemployment Benefit /Jobseekers Benefit) is ceased.

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 was required to facilitate the processing of such cases. Revenue has completed this system development and the required technology is now in place. Revenue has confirmed that in excess of 30,000 employees have started or re-started employments since 1 May 2020, of which approximately 10,000 are ‘rehired’ staff that are eligible for the TWSS. Employers who submitted payroll after 1 May for those ‘rehired’ staff were processed for refund and the refund will be in employers’ bank accounts early this week. The system will pick-up and process additional re-hires on a daily basis that appear on payroll submissions.

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Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

72. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if a decision on a wage subsidy application by a club (details supplied) in County Cork will be re-examined; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7776/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 sets out the qualifying conditions required for access to the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS). The legislative requirements 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 15 March deadline in respect of the February 2020 payroll submission was recently extended to 'before' 1 April by Revenue in circumstances where all previous payroll submissions were filed before 15 March 2020.

The TWSS builds on data returned to Revenue through the PAYE system and as such is a fully automated solution that is designed around the legislative provisions. The scheme calculates the level of subsidy due based on the employee's '*Average Revenue Net Weekly PAY*' (*ARNWP*) during January and February 2020. The system cannot calculate a subsidy payment for employees that were not on the employer's payroll at 29 February.

I have been advised by Revenue that the person in question did not begin his current employment until 9 March 2020, which is outside of the specified dates provided in the legislation for the TWSS. For this reason, it was not possible for Revenue to provide his employer with access to the scheme on his behalf.

Revenue Commissioners

73. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Finance if the administrative officer audit and compliance 2018 panel which expired on 31 December 2018 is still operative due to the fact that the new panel has not gone to interview stage and the process has been put on hold indefinitely; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7787/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that three panels were formed as a result of the 2018 Administrative Officer Audit and Compliance competition. These three panels expired on 31 December 2019, in line with normal practice on the duration of such panels.

While on relatively rare occasions, Revenue may consider extending panels for business reasons, in this instance there is no business requirement to reinstate the expired panels. Furthermore, reinstatement of the expired panels would disadvantage those who have applied as part of the competition currently in progress.

I am further advised by Revenue that recruitment and selection processes are prioritised as appropriate to meet business needs. In line with best practice and in the context of Government restrictions and physical distancing measures in place during the COVID-19 pandemic, Revenue is expanding the range of remote selection methods in use. As regards the current com-

petition for Administrative Officer Audit and Compliance, registration closed on 27 December 2019; the first stages of selection, online testing and shortlisting, are concluded and candidates have been invited to submit video assessments by 25 May 2020.

Mortgage Lending

74. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to home buyers with mortgage approvals based on their pre-Covid-19 financial earnings that are now temporarily on pandemic payments and have lost their mortgage approval; the steps he will take to support families in such situations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7851/20]

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 provide 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 this regulatory framework, 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.

Lenders continue to process mortgage applications and have supports in place to assist customers impacted by COVID-19. The Banking & Payments Federation Ireland (BPMFI) has published 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 Central Bank has also 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.

Corporation Tax

75. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the conditions applied to a member state before it can avail of funding (details supplied); if corporation tax reform in terms of rate, minimum effective tax and digital tax will not be conditions to accessing funding through the model; his plans if the European Commission applies conditions such as corporation tax reform on formal proposals in relation to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7890/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy will be aware, Members

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of the European Council met by video conference on 26th March to discuss the COVID-19 crisis. In their statement of the 26th March, leaders acknowledged that the pandemic constitutes an unprecedented challenge for Europe and the whole world and that it required urgent, decisive, and comprehensive action at the EU, national, regional and local levels. Leaders mandated the European Commission to bring forward proposals for a comprehensive recovery plan including plans for investment across the EU. The European Commission is expected to publish their proposals on 27th May.

On the 13th May, the President of the European Commission, President von der Leyen, made an address to the European Parliament in which she outlined that the Commission's proposed recovery package would consist of two parts; firstly, the EU Budget/the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and secondly, on top of the MFF, a recovery instrument to be funded through a larger headroom within the EU Budget. We await the European Commission's proposals.

In the meantime, a number of Member States have published their views on what should be included in the Recovery Plan, how and where the expenditure should be targeted, whether support should be provided through loans and/or grants, whether conditions should be applied to Member States availing of the funding and how the recovery fund should be financed.

On 18th May, Chancellor Merkel and President Macron presented joint French and German proposals for European Recovery. The centrepiece of their proposals is a €500 billion recovery fund for additional EU spending through the EU Budget, jointly borrowed on the markets, to provide financial support for the most affected sectors and regions on the basis of EU budget programmes and in line with European priorities.

The proposals made by France and Germany are an important contribution and a step in the right direction on Europe's recovery efforts. They are proposals from two Member States - we are assessing the detail of these proposals along with input from other Member States. Agreement on a way forward will require the approval of all 27 Member States.

The Recovery Fund must focus on the most pressing economic needs to reboot the economy once the health crisis has receded. It should be temporary and targeted, prioritising sectors and regions that have been most impacted but also those that can generate and enable sustainable economic growth in the new normal of the post-Covid economy. In particular, it should be deployed to accelerate both the digital and green transitions in the EU. Equally, a recovery fund and other funding must create a future for business models that are viable.

Ireland will continue to engage positively in the MFF and recovery plan discussions and work with Member States and the institutions to build consensus for early agreement. There are issues and matters, including those raised in the French and German proposals, that need careful consideration to assess the implications for Ireland. It will not be until then that we will fully know the specifics of the extent to which and how Member States can avail of funding for the MFF and the Recovery Fund.

The European Commission's proposals on the Post 2020 MFF and Recovery Fund will be the subject of detailed negotiations. When we have sight of their proposals, we will have a clearer understanding of the impacts of them for Ireland.

With regard to the tax proposals linked to the French and German proposed recovery fund, the Deputy will have noted that France, Germany and the European Commission have all expressed their support for the OECD process as the best forum in which to address issues arising in the field of international taxation.

Nevertheless, Commissioner Gentolini recently re-affirmed his intention to propose a new

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EU levy on digital services and a minimum corporate tax rate in 2021, if global negotiations fall short. While the Franco-German Initiative for European Recovery from the Coronavirus Crisis echoes this ambition, such moves will require the agreement of all Member States. The economic context has changed dramatically in recent months and all countries are now considering what impact the current crisis may have on their overall tax systems, which may influence their views on international tax issues.

Much progress has been made in the current discussions at OECD, and technical work at the OECD is continuing. The intention is to find political agreement for work on addressing tax and digitalisation by the end of 2020 and we remain focused on that goal.

Question No. 76 answered with Question No. 71.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

77. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to include seasonal workers under the wage subsidy scheme in view of the fact that their period of employment ordinarily would be during the summer tourism season; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7949/20]

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.

The TWSS is an emergency measure to deal with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy. Of necessity, the underlying legislation and the scheme itself were developed quickly, having regard to the urgent Government objective of getting 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. It must be accepted that the TWSS cannot be adapted to meet the particular circumstances of individual employers or employees.

In the context of the compelling need for immediate implementation of the TWSS, the scheme necessarily had to build on data returned to Revenue through its real-time PAYE system. The key conditions 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 before, in general, 15 March 2020, but extended recently to 1 April 2020.

The latter two conditions were particularly designed with a view to preventing abuse of the scheme. The wage subsidy per employee is calculated based on the net pay reported for January and February 2020. The scheme does not distinguish between ordinary wages, shift allowances, overtime, bonuses or commission or between part-time or full-time employees. Moreover, the scheme has no role in relation to the employer/employee relationship in so far as terms, conditions and entitlements of the employment are concerned.

Accordingly, it follows that 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 individual commenced a new employment after that date, or returned to the payroll of

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his or her employer after that date following a period of unpaid leave, he or she does not meet the eligibility criteria with the employer as he or she would not have been on the employer's payroll at that date.

Small and Medium Enterprises

78. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to aid small businesses that cannot receive a commercial loan from a bank in spite of the provision of the SME credit guarantee scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7951/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As Minister for Finance, I have no function in the commercial lending decisions made by banks but if an SME has been refused bank credit then Credit Review can assist them (<https://www.creditreview.ie>). Credit Review helps SMEs and farmers who have had an application for credit of up to €3 million declined or reduced by the main banks, and who feel that they have a viable business proposition. This is a strictly confidential process between the business, the Credit Review and the bank.

One of my main concerns as Minister for Finance, and of my Ministerial colleagues is to ensure that SMEs have access to sufficient liquidity, and that access to credit for SMEs is maintained. Government has announced a range of measures to assist companies deal with the consequences of the COVID-19 restrictions, and to ensure that they have access to sufficient liquidity. These include tax measures, as well as loan schemes, to assist SMEs. In addition, my colleague Heather Humphreys TD, Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation has introduced grant schemes that are available through Enterprise Ireland and the Local Enterprise Offices.

On May 2 a further COVID-19 supports was announced to support SMEs. This includes a Restart Grant which will provide up to a €10,000 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.

You can be assured that I, along with my ministerial colleagues, continue to work to ensure that all necessary supports are available for businesses affected by COVID-19.

Question No. 79 answered with Question No. 38.

Help-To-Buy Scheme

80. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to extend the help-to-buy scheme to second-hand homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7963/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Government is conscious that there is currently a supply shortage of housing and of the particular challenges faced by first-time buyers. Section 477C of the Taxes Consolidation Act of 1997 provides for The Help to Buy scheme (HTB) which was initially announced on 19 July 2016 as part of the 'Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness'.

HTB was due to terminate on 31 December 2019, however, in Finance Act 2019 I provided for an extension of the scheme, in its present form, for a further two-year period up to 31 December 2021. This extension aligns with the timeline envisaged for building more homes in

Rebuilding Ireland.

An increase in the supply of new housing is fundamental to resolving the current crisis. One of the main aims of the policy underpinning the design of HTB was to help encourage the building of additional new properties. By restricting the scheme solely to new dwellings and new self-builds, it is anticipated that the resulting increase in demand for affordable new build homes will encourage the construction of an additional supply of such properties.

If the scheme were also available for second hand properties, it would have little or no effect on the provision of additional supply, and this would consist primarily of ‘economic deadweight’ in terms of incentive effect. Economic deadweight is an important consideration which is taken into account when evaluating new tax incentive measures and refers to the amount of activity that would have taken place anyway in the absence of an incentive or scheme. The higher the level of deadweight, the less the net benefits of the scheme.

Given these considerations, I can confirm to the Deputy that I do not intend to extend the Help to Buy scheme to second hand properties.

Insurance Industry

81. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the engagement he has had with the insurance industry in relation to rebates for public liability insurance and employer liability insurance for those businesses forced to close due to restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of Covid-19; the engagement he has had with UK companies that are providing insurance to businesses here; if the Central Bank has the power to influence companies in this respect; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8006/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): At the outset, I believe it is important to state that neither I, as Minister for Finance nor the Central Bank, can compel insurers to provide rebates for public liability insurance and employer liability insurance for those businesses forced to close due to restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to their customers. This said, 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, particularly in terms of forbearance and other flexible measures being offered to them. My officials and I have been engaging with the sector in an effort to get some much needed certainty for business policyholders.

I wrote to Insurance Ireland on 27 March requesting that it 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 10 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.

I believe that it is imperative that insurers implement these measures wholeheartedly and without causing difficulties to their customers. The focus of my engagement to date has been with Insurance Ireland, noting that a number of its members have UK-based parent companies including one particular company who cover play centres. Despite my Department actively engaging with Insurance Ireland on that matter, the company has not signed up to this agreement. My Department continues to engage with Insurance Ireland on this matter.

In relation to those insurers who are not members of Insurance Ireland including UK insurers, my understanding is that they are aware of this forbearance arrangement, however have made the decision not to apply it for their own particular reasons. It should be noted that I have no influence over these companies in relation to their day to day commercial decisions, however I have asked my officials to consider how best they could engage with such companies to see if they could reconsider their position and participate in the forbearance arrangement or a similar arrangement that would assist their Irish customers.

In terms of the role of the Central Bank on this matter, the Deputy should note that the Central Bank has written to insurance firms with Irish consumers, irrespective of where the firms are prudentially regulated. The Bank requires firms to have processes in place to engage positively with customers who are experiencing difficulties in the payment of premiums because of COVID-19. The Bank also expects insurance firms to take account of the difficult and challenging situation in which many customers find themselves. The Bank has also stated that, as a matter of urgency, firms should develop consumer-centric solutions to the handling of insurance payment breaks and policy rebates in light of the COVID-19 emergency.

As stated at the outset, the Central Bank has no mandate to instruct insurers to issue rebates. Additionally, the Central Bank does not have a mandate for investigating individual policyholder complaints or making determinations on the interpretation of policy wordings; these powers belong to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (where appropriate) and ultimately the courts. Nonetheless, as part of a wider programme of supervision which commenced in March, the Central Bank is continuing to engage with the larger insurance firms to ascertain their approach to dealing with specific elements of COVID-19.

Finally, I would like to assure the Deputy that my Department will continue to be as proactive as it can be on these issues and will continue to liaise with the Central Bank, Insurance Ireland and others, as appropriate, on an ongoing basis.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

82. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the number of businesses that have availed of each of the Covid-19 supports put in place by his Department; the number of employees that have availed of each scheme; the cost to date of each scheme in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8008/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy will be aware, Revenue has worked with my Department to introduce a series of measures and supports to help

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businesses deal with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further details on each of these measures and some clarifications in respect of existing measures which are relevant can be found on the Revenue website at the following link: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/communications/covid19/index.aspx> .

Many of these supports are simplifications of existing administrative practices or reprioritising of certain activities by Revenue. As such, I am advised that it is not possible to provide the numbers of businesses availing of these separately to normal procedures. Many of the measures will have only a temporary cash flow impact and are expected to be Exchequer neutral in terms of cost overall.

The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) and the proposed ‘warehousing’ of certain COVID-19 related tax debts are two of the most significant measures introduced to support businesses.

Revenue published an initial set of statistics on the operation of the TWSS on 9 April 2020, which have been updated and extended on a weekly basis since then. This information is available at <https://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. Revenue has advised me that it is continuing to undertake further analysis of the TWSS and will publish further updated and expanded statistics on a regular basis. These updates will also be published at the link above.

In relation to tax debt management, I am advised by Revenue that measures introduced to assist businesses experiencing cashflow and trading difficulties have provided vital liquidity support to the value of €1.3 billion to the end of April. These measures have benefitted in excess of 61,000 VAT and PAYE registered businesses. Revenue is analysing debt incurred since the onset of the pandemic crisis and will publish further information on this in due course.

Covid-19 Pandemic

83. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider extending the capital acquisitions tax deadline of 31 October 2020 to 31 January 2021 to bring it into line with extensions granted in other areas of the tax code in view of difficulties in disposing of property during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8013/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I recognise that these are undoubtedly very difficult and unprecedented times. A series of tax and other measures have been put in place to ameliorate particular difficulties. These measures continue to be considered as the situation evolves. I have absolute confidence that Revenue will respond appropriately to tax issues faced by taxpayers as a consequence of the COVID 19 situation and will keep taxpayers fully informed of decisions in this area.

In relation to Capital Acquisitions Tax (CAT), I am advised by Revenue that the date on which CAT is payable is determined by the ‘valuation date’ on which the market value of the property included in a gift or an inheritance must be established. Where this date is between 1 January and 31 August, CAT is payable by 31 October in the same year. Where this date is between 1 September and 31 December, CAT is payable by 31 October in the following year.

Section 30 of the Capital Acquisitions Tax Consolidation Act 2003 contains the rules for determining the valuation date. The valuation date depends on the circumstances particular to a case and is not a fixed date in relation to all gifts and inheritances. In the case of a gift, the

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valuation date is generally the date on which the property is given to a beneficiary. In the case of an inheritance, however, it can be earlier as it is the date on which the executors of the will become entitled to retain the property for the benefit of a beneficiary. Generally, this is the date on which probate or administration is granted.

Where the benefit consists of property, it may well be the case that CAT is payable before a beneficiary has received the property due to a delay in completing the administration of an estate. Equally, where a beneficiary has actually received the property, CAT may be payable before a beneficiary has had the opportunity to sell that property and pay the tax liability.

Outside of the current COVID-19 circumstances, the length of the conveyancing process is such that it is often the case that a CAT liability arises before a property can be sold to pay that liability. To provide for such situation, taxpayers have a statutory entitlement to payment by instalments in certain circumstances. Monthly instalment payments for up to five years may be allowed subject to the payment of interest at an annual rate of 8%. However, Revenue has discretion to allow payment of CAT by instalments over a longer period in exceptional circumstances where the tax cannot be paid without excessive hardship. In such circumstances, Revenue also has discretion to allow payment to be postponed for such period and on such terms (including the waiver of interest) as it thinks fit.

Revenue will consider each case on its merits, taking into account both the financial circumstances of the beneficiary and the nature of the gift or inheritance involved.

Cycle to Work Scheme

84. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider changes to the cycle to work scheme to facilitate employees purchasing new bicycles and electric bicycles (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8015/20]

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.

It should be noted that the cost of a bicycle purchased under the scheme may be more than €1,000, however the exemption from tax does not apply above this limit.

I have no plans at present for any increase in the financial limit or to change the five year rule.

Company Liquidations

85. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Finance if he has discussed the liquidation of a company (details supplied) with a bank that is a shareholder in the parent company; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8060/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy will be aware, I have

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engaged, and will continue to engage, extensively with the Banking and Payments Federation (BPF) and the banks directly in relation to supports for personal and business customers affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, officials in my Department are alert to issues raised directly by the public and these inform the Department's ongoing engagement process and policy formation. All the banks, Bank of Ireland included, have continued to evolve and expand the supports they have available and I would expect that this process will continue.

Bank of Ireland has introduced a wide variety of solutions designed to affect both personal and business customers affected by the COVID-19 crisis including mortgage breaks and cash flow supports for businesses.

To answer the specific question raised by the Deputy, I can confirm for the Deputy that neither I nor officials in my Department have been in discussions with Bank of Ireland regarding the liquidation of Debenhams' business in Ireland.

The Deputy may be aware that, as Minister for Finance, I am precluded from intervening in how Bank of Ireland manages its relationship with any of its customers. Decisions in this regard are solely the responsibility of the board and management of the bank which must be run on an independent and commercial basis. The independence of the banks in which the State has a shareholding is protected by Relationship Frameworks which are legally binding documents that cannot be changed unilaterally. These frameworks, which are publicly available, were insisted upon by the European Commission to protect competition in the Irish market.

Question No. 86 answered with Question No. 38.

Tax Code

87. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance if there are planned changes to the preliminary corporation tax and preliminary income tax requirements specifically in view of the current trading environment due to Covid-19. [8164/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that taxpayers who are required to pay preliminary tax, whether individuals or companies, are required to estimate their tax liability for the year (or for an accounting period in the case of company) and to make payments on account in respect of that tax liability. The law affords taxpayers options on how to calculate their preliminary tax payments, including in most cases allowing the taxpayer to base the payment, either on their estimated liability for the current year, or period, or on their final tax liability for a previous year, or period. This gives the taxpayer the flexibility to choose the option that, having regard to their own circumstances, including fluctuations in taxable income between years, gives rise to the lowest preliminary tax payment.

A self-assessed income taxpayer can base their preliminary tax payment on the lower of either

- 90% of the current year's liability; or
- 100% of the prior year's liability.

Individuals who pay their tax by direct debit have the additional option of basing their preliminary tax payment on 105% of their liability for the pre-preceding year.

A company that is a "small company" – broadly, a company whose corporation tax liability in the preceding accounting period did not exceed €200,000 – also has the option of basing their preliminary tax payment on either 90% of its liability for the current accounting period or

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100% of its liability in the preceding accounting period.

A company that is not a 'small company' - because its corporation tax liability in the preceding accounting period exceeded €200,000 - is required to pay preliminary tax in two instalments. The first instalment, which is due in the 6th month of the accounting period, can be based on the lower of 50% of the company's liability in the preceding accounting period or 45% of its liability for the current accounting period. The second instalment of preliminary tax, which is due in the 11th month of the company's accounting period, must bring the company's preliminary tax payments up to 90% of its corporation tax liability for the current accounting period.

Therefore, those taxpayers who are experiencing difficult trading conditions because of the COVID-19 pandemic and whose income in 2020 will be significantly reduced compared to 2019, can opt to calculate their preliminary tax payment for 2020 based on their estimated liability for 2020 rather than their liability for 2019. This will minimise the amount of preliminary tax to be paid.

The Deputy may be aware that Revenue has introduced a series of measures to assist taxpayers who are negatively impacted by the current Covid-19 pandemic. Where a company files a Corporation Tax Return (Form CT1) relating to an accounting period ending June 2019 onwards (and due from 23 March 2020 onwards), late because of Covid-19 circumstances, restrictions on the use of certain reliefs such as loss relief, which would normally apply where a return is filed late, will not be applied. Also, a surcharge for the late filing of Form CT1 relating to an accounting period ending June 2019 onwards is suspended until further notice. In addition, where financial statements, which were due to be filed electronically (iXBRL accounts) in March 2020 onwards, are filed late because of COVID-19 restrictions, the application of a surcharge for the late filing is suspended until further notice. The processing of refunds due will continue in the absence, due to the current restrictions, of the iXBRL accounts as part of the CT1.

My Department and Revenue continue to monitor developments and will respond appropriately to tax issues faced by taxpayers as a consequence of the COVID 19 situation and will keep taxpayers fully informed of decisions in this area.

Question No. 88 answered with Question No. 58.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

89. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that some employers in receipt of the wage subsidy scheme are making the employees continue to work full-time but for substantially reduced salary; if he will address this matter immediately; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8274/20]

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 Pub-

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lic 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:

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

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

90. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if he has checked or will check the number of companies that are registered offshore but are operating here that are in receipt of the wage subsidy scheme or other special Covid-19 financial supports; the number of companies in this category; the amount of public funds they are receiving in total and on average; his views on whether companies avoiding tax here by being registered offshore is acceptable; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8275/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme is only available to employers registered in Ireland whose business activities are adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and applies as regards employees who were on the employer's Irish payroll at 29 February 2020. In relation to eligible companies who are registered as employers here, the scheme applies to companies resident for tax purposes in the State and also to non-resident companies that carry on a trade in the State through an Irish branch. I understand you are referring to the latter category, being companies that are not tax resident in the State but which are operating here through an Irish branch.

A non-resident company that carries on a trade in the State through an Irish branch is chargeable to, and cannot avoid, Irish corporation tax on trading profits and other income relating to the Irish branch. I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that they are unable to provide aggregate information in relation to wage subsidy payments made to this category of employer – to companies that are not tax resident in the State but are trading here through an Irish branch. However, in due course, and in accordance with section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020, the names and addresses of all employers to whom a temporary wage subsidy has been paid by Revenue will be published on the Revenue website.

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91. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if in the interests of supporting a fair economic recovery, he will continue to provide full income supports to workers in sectors particularly hard hit by the impact of Covid-19 and the public health measures (details supplied); if he will establish specific tailor-made financial packages of support for these workers and sectors and urgently engage with these workers sectors in a suitable forum to discuss with them the way in which such supports can best be designed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8276/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): In response to the Covid 19 Public Health emergency, the Government developed a suite of measures designed to support households and businesses that have been negatively impacted by the pandemic and the restrictions that were put in place as a result. These measures include temporary income support for individuals by way of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS).

As Minister for Finance, I have direct policy responsibility for the TWSS; the PUP is a matter for the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

The legislation underpinning the TWSS is set out in Section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020. The legislation and the scheme itself were developed to support the Government objective of providing assistance to employers and employees that have been seriously affected by the pandemic.

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.

The future of the TWSS remains under review and an announcement will be made in due course. I acknowledge that certain sectors will face particular challenges into the future as we gradually re-open our economy, and this is one of many factors that I take account of in my current deliberations.

Public Appointments Service

92. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of persons that were employed arising from a recruitment competition (details supplied); the number of persons that have yet to be given a start date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7159/20]

95. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when the persons that went through a recruitment campaign (details supplied) will be offered a start date for employment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7161/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 92 and 95 together.

As the Deputy will be aware the Public Appointments Service (PAS) is the independent recruiter of people into the civil and public service.

PAS advertised a Clerical Officer (Dublin) Competition in April 2019 from which 997 candidates were deemed suitable at interview stage and placed on a panel from which vacancies were filled. A total of 79 candidates have been assigned from this panel to An Garda Síochána to date.

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As to when these candidates commenced duty or are due to take up appointment is a matter for An Garda Síochána.

I have asked An Garda Síochána to supply this information directly to the Deputy.

Flood Relief Schemes

93. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of flood protection works at Springfield, Clonlara, County Clare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8068/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): Clare County Council (CCC) is the responsible or contracting authority in relation to the proposed flood relief scheme in Springfield/Clonlara with funding provided by the Office of Public Works (OPW). The current position is as follows:

The engineering design consultants are finalising the options report for the scheme in light of updated survey information and consultations with relevant stakeholders and with CCC and the OPW. The flood waters in the area receded in early April, which enabled completion of the onsite inspection and walkover survey required to finalise the Environmental Assessment and report. Planning drawings and documentation are also nearing completion. CCC has been in contact with land owners affected by the proposals and has consulted with local residents. The Council has indicated that they expect to submit the proposed scheme for planning approval in June or July subject to completion of all documentation.

Drainage Schemes

94. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the necessary funding will be provided as a matter of urgency to carry out emergency improvement works to the embankment at Cromane Lower, Killorglin, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8097/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): The Office of Public Works (OPW) carries out a programme of Arterial Drainage Maintenance to a total of 11,500 km of river channel and approximately 730 km of embankments. These maintenance works relate to arterial drainage schemes completed by the OPW under the Arterial Drainage Acts 1945 and 1995.

The embankment in question does not form part of any arterial drainage scheme under the auspices of this office.

Local flooding issues are a matter, in the first instance, for each local authority to investigate and address. For areas not covered by the Arterial Drainage Maintenance Programme, the OPW operates a Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme. It is open to all Local Authorities to submit a funding application under the Scheme. This administrative Scheme's eligibility criteria, including a requirement that any measures are cost beneficial, are published on the OPW website, www.opw.ie. Any application received is considered in accordance with the scheme eligibility criteria, and having regard to the overall availability of resources for flood risk management.

Question No. 95 answered with Question No. 92.

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Departmental Funding

96. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status on an application by a school (details supplied) under the Public Service Innovation Fund; the timeframe for decisions on applications for this funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7209/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Public Service Innovation Fund was established in 2019 as an initiative under the current framework programme for reform in the Public Service - Our Public Service 2020. This highly competitive fund aims to support innovative projects from across the Public Service and turn their ideas into a reality. Projects are evaluated on specific criteria: value, outcomes and user impact; novelty; transferability, scalability and learning; collaboration with other organisations; evidence-base for application; and the procurement plan and contribution of the recipient organisation.

Projects are sought that can:

- help add value to Public Service organisations and make what they do better for the user/public;
- help create efficiencies throughout the Public Service;
- demonstrate new ways of working and help deliver strategic outcomes for the Public Service
- implement approaches and ideas that can be spread elsewhere or help to create learnings for other Public Servants from experimentation
- encourage cross-organisational or cross-silo working and show commitment from organisations to innovation; and
- use evidence and data to drive innovation or seek to create evidence and data for future innovations.

The number and quality of applications received to the 2020 call for projects demonstrates the high levels of innovation and enthusiasm across all sectors of the Public Service. Just over 9 per cent of applications received funding offers in the latest call and all applicants have been notified of the outcome of their application during w/b 11th May.

Public servants from all sectors are encouraged to join up to the recently established Innovation Network where they will hear about future funding calls and innovation-related development opportunities. More information is available at: www.ops2020.gov.ie/innovation.

Telecommunications Infrastructure

97. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the income received from each current, former or decommissioned Garda station, site and or building that has a telecom and or communications mast on-site that leases space on that mast to companies to use and or take a fixing on in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020 by location and company that pays a subscription for its lease on the mast; the duration of each contract for the use of the mast; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7437/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): The Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland (CPW) grant licences to Mo-

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mobile Network Operators (MNOs) who hold a Mobile Telecommunications Licence to provide Mobile Telephone Services to install telecommunications equipment on State property. These properties are primarily Garda telecommunication structures and rooftops of other Office of Public Works (OPW) buildings.

A standard licence agreement sets out the terms and conditions under which mobile phone operators are permitted to locate on OPW property.

The attached table shows the gross income (excluding VAT) received by the State under licences granted by the Commissioners of Public Works in respect of mobile telecommunications equipment on State property for 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020.

The information by provider is currently being collated and will be provided shortly to the Deputy.

[PDF RefT]

Flood Relief Schemes

98. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the position regarding the Enniscorthy flood defence scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7774/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): The Enniscorthy (River Slaney) flood defence scheme is being progressed by Wexford County Council (WCC) on behalf of the Commissioners of Public Works as a scheme under the Arterial Drainage Acts 1945 and 1995. This is a significant scheme within the Office of Public Works (OPW) €1 billion flood relief investment programme, and on completion will protect 236 properties in the town.

The Scheme is currently awaiting formal Confirmation to proceed from the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. This is a statutory requirement under the Arterial Drainage Acts, which now, under EU regulations, also requires the Minister to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment of the proposed Scheme. This will involve, inter alia, a formal review of the submitted Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR) by the Minister. The review may require further consultation with the Office of Public Works, to clarify and/or amend aspects of the EIAR.

Public Sector Pensions

99. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform further to Parliamentary Question No. 131 of 5 March 2020, the progress made in relation to the new guidance on the implementation of section 52(6) and (7) of the Public Service Pensions (Single Scheme and Other Provisions) Act 2012; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8030/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I can advise the Deputy that my Department has now completed the review that I referred to in my reply to Parliamentary Question No. 131 of 5 March 2020 in relation to the pensions benefit cap under section 52 of the Public Service Pensions (Single Scheme and Other Provisions) Act 2012.

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As a result of that review, I have now asked my officials to draw up new guidance on application of the benefit cap to replace the previous guidance set out in DPER Circular 15/2016.

The new Circular is currently being progressed and aims to bring greater clarity to the calculation of the pension entitlements of individuals affected.

Once the Circular has issued, my officials will be available to provide appropriate assistance to the administrators of public service pensions schemes in the implementation of the guidance for cases to which the benefit cap applies.

Pension Provisions

100. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if a resolution to the pension entitlements of a person (details supplied) will be expedited; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8237/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As noted in my response to Parliamentary Question No. 155 of 10 December 2019, the individual in this case is subject to application of the pensions benefit cap under section 52 subsections (6) and (7) of the Public Service Pensions (Single Scheme and Other Provisions) Act 2012. The benefit cap imposes a limit on the total amount of pensionable service which can be taken into account when calculating a public servant's pension entitlements where an individual has been a member of more than one public service pension scheme.

I can advise the Deputy that my Department has completed the review into the operation of the benefit cap that I referred to in my previous reply, and I have now asked my officials to draw up new guidance on application of the benefit cap to replace the previous guidance set out in DPER Circular 15/2016.

The new Circular is currently being progressed and will have implications for cases in which application of the benefit cap arises including the case you have referenced. It aims to bring greater clarity to the calculation of the pension entitlements of individuals affected.

Once the Circular has issued, my officials will be available to provide appropriate assistance to the administrators of public service pensions schemes in the implementation of the guidance in cases to which the benefit cap applies.

SOLAS Training and Education Programmes

101. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when Safe Pass courses are expected to resume as part of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. [7263/20]

104. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on whether urgent consideration should be given to resume Safe Pass courses delivered by SOLAS in view of the fact the construction industry has resumed activity under phase 1 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7449/20]

105. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when SOLAS will resume Safe Pass training courses. [7499/20]

108. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if Safe Pass training

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has resumed; the date for it to resume; and if Safe Passes that have expired have been extended. [8095/20]

191. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when providers of Safe Pass courses can start to provide courses to new entrants to the sector who have not had a Safe Pass certificate before; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7594/20]

238. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of contingencies for persons whose Safe Pass has expired and who require one to return to work (details supplied). [7872/20]

291. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if those whose Safe Pass is due to expire before full reopening will be extended to cover the same period in view of current restrictions and health advice regarding social distancing. [8153/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 101, 104, 105, 108, 191, 238 and 291 together.

Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Construction) Regulations 2013, construction workers in Ireland are legally bound to hold a valid Safe Pass Registration Card. The Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation recently amended these regulations to extend the validity of Safe Pass cards with an expiration date after the 1st March 2020 for the duration of the Covid-19 emergency period.

The delivery of Safe Pass courses is currently suspended in accordance with public health measures. SOLAS has examined the potential for online delivery as a means of continuing national construction health and safety courses while adhering to public health measures. No immediate solution has been identified that is equitable with the existing Safe Pass course delivery model, in being accessible to all eligible workers, provides real time course participants supports (literacy and numeracy) and interpreter services, as well as ensuring assessment integrity.

The timeline for return of Safe Pass training is under consideration, informed by public health advice. Contingency plans are also being put in place to support delivery of Safe Pass training within health and social distancing guidelines once restrictions are lifted.

School Transport

102. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason a person (details supplied) has to pay a large amount each year for bus fees; if more school buses will be introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7306/20]

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

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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.

The annual charge for school transport services is €100 per annum for primary children and €350 for post primary children with a maximum family charge of €220 for primary children only or €650 overall.

Children who are eligible for school transport and who hold valid medical cards (GMS Scheme) are exempt from paying the annual charge. In addition, there is no charge for children who are eligible for school transport under the terms of my Department's School Transport Scheme for children with Special Educational Needs.

Bus Éireann has advised that the family in question are not eligible for school transport as they are not attending their nearest school. Bus Éireann has also advised that a ticket was issued to the family referred to by the Deputy on a concessionary basis for the 2019/20 school year.

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.

Medical Qualifications

103. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of places in medical schools; the number of Irish students admitted annually; the number of non-Irish students admitted annually; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7405/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Higher Education Authority collects data on the number of enrolments in the higher education institutions. The number of students enrolled in year 1 for the academic year 2017/18 (latest year for which full data is available) on the undergraduate full time honours degree doctor training courses by institution and domicile are outlined in the attached table.

[Year 1]

Questions Nos. 104 and 105 answered with Question No. 101.

Institutes of Technology

106. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when a decision will be made on an application (details supplied) for a pension abatement waiver submitted in July 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7522/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to advise the Deputy that Section 52 of the Public Service Pensions (Single Scheme and Other Provisions) Act 2012 provides for pension abatement for employees in the public sector ; Section 52(4) provides for the waiver of such abatement at the discretion of the Minister of Public Expenditure & Reform.

I understand that the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform recently issued their decision on an application for a waiver of abatement in relation to the person concerned and advised his employer accordingly.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

107. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a student based at a network (details supplied) is entitled to the pandemic unemployment payment if already in receipt of jobseeker's; if he will reinstate the travel allowance of €12.70 and the meal allowance of €4; if not, when is he expecting to reintroduce such allowances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7769/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan): The National Learning Network (NLN) provides training through the Specialist Training Provider programme on behalf of Education and Training Boards. Participating learners receive a training allowance in lieu of certain social welfare entitlements.

The COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced 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 been in employment immediately prior to 13th March and have lost their employment and income due to the impact of the pandemic. This payment is not payable in addition to a jobseeker's payment. If the student concerned satisfies the conditions for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment they should contact the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to ensure that they are in receipt of the appropriate type of payment.

Circular 23 /2020 was issued by my Department in March 2020 to guide learner payments during the current crisis. While training allowances continue to be paid to learners until they can complete their course, additional payments that assist in the cost of actual attendance on training courses and / or work experience such as travel and meals are only paid when they are incurred. Therefore they would not generally apply when centres are closed.

Question No. 108 answered with Question No. 101.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

109. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if financial supports and measures will be made available to ensure social distancing measures can be properly implemented on school buses when schools are reopened in the 2020/2021 school year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8115/20]

301. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if specific advice or information has been given to the bus fleet including private bus operators which provide students with transport to and from schools nationwide regarding future plans in relation to spacing, safety and the possible lifting of Covid-19 restrictions. [8259/20]

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Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan):

I propose to take Questions Nos. 109 and 301 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.

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.

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 phased re-opening which will be based on public health advice and which will put the best interests of our school population first.

The operation of school transport services in September 2020 will be informed by the outcome of this planning for re-opening schools.

Covid-19 Pandemic

110. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the phase under which educational services and facilities that deliver measures for children with disabilities will be allowed reopen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8174/20]

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.

My 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 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.

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

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at <https://www.education.ie/covid19/wellbeing/>.

Guidelines for continued provision of Guidance Counselling and resources available to support practice are 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

111. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on putting in place a system to monitor the success, challenges and failures of the 2020 leaving certificate arrangements as a case study for future reforms of the senior cycle assessment in post-primary schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7057/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The postponement of the Leaving Certificate examinations from summer 2020 to a later date and the provision of Calculated Grades to Leaving Certificate students have occurred solely as a response to the circumstances caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The decisions to postpone the examinations and offer Calculated Grades were informed by health advice and by advice from an advisory committee of stakeholders, including representatives of students, teachers, parents and school managers, which I established in April 2020. The way in which the advisory group worked to examine the challenges facing the education system and to find solutions is an example of how I have been determined to involve stakeholders in building educational policy and approaches to implementation. I have also been clear with stakeholders about the exceptional nature of the challenges that Ireland and its educational system faced in 2020 because of Covid-19 and it was clearly understood among all the partners that the arrangements in place for the provision of Calculated Grades will not be regarded as a precedent or as agreement by teachers, principals or schools to implement such arrangements in future years.

Work at the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment on the Review of Senior Cycle has continued throughout 2020 and is nearing completion. The NCCA is completing an Advisory Report on the review setting out areas of work and plans to be pursued in the future

development of senior cycle education.

Assessment and examination arrangements will comprise an important area of the Advisory Report. However, while the commentary in that report may refer to aspects of the assessment arrangements which are a feature of this year's Leaving Certificate, it must also take account of the exceptional circumstances behind the arrangements that will apply this year and the understanding of the partners around their introduction. In addition, the Senior Cycle Review is intended to provide a framework for a broad range of learning and assessment arrangements, including terminal examinations, building on extensive research and evidence from Ireland and other educational systems.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

112. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when parents and teachers can expect a detailed plan on the way in which they can return to school in September 2020; and if schools will receive financial support to fund a risk assessment and funding for extra works required. [7064/20]

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. These will now be worked through in detail as part of the development of the roadmap for reopening schools. The Department is conscious of the need for early clarity on key issues in order to facilitate and support planning for schools re-opening in September.

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

113. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if junior certificate or leaving certificate examinations material had been already prepared for the 2020 exam; if so, if these papers can be salvaged for future examinations; the cost of preparing these papers; the function of State Examinations Commission staff for the coming months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7070/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The State Examinations Commission has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

National Educational Psychological Service

114. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the recommendations

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and written instructions from NEPS to students and schools during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly for those preparing for cancelled examinations. [7074/20]

216. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on the performance of his Department in supporting the well-being of students in relation to the announcements regarding the leaving certificate 2020. [7740/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 114 and 216 together.

I am acutely aware of the challenges faced by students, teachers and families at this difficult time. The welfare of students and that of their families is front and centre in all decision making. 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 InThis 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 was written by NEPS and has been published by my Department.

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NEPS psychologists continue to be available to provide advice and support to school principals, teachers, students, parents. 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

115. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the school transport scheme for pupils will be reassessed in view of the difficulties facing parents in getting their children accepted into their nearest school (details supplied). [7077/20]

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 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.

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

Children who are eligible for school transport and who complete the application 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 applications from ineligible children exceeds the number of spare seats available, tickets are allocated using an agreed selection process.

In cases where the Department is satisfied that the nearest school is full, eligibility for school transport will be determined based on the distance that children reside from their next nearest school having regard to ethos and language. If a family has further information in regard to the closest school being full they should contact School Transport Section of my Department. Further information in this regard is available on my Department's website *www.education.ie*.

Special Educational Needs

116. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the July provision is going ahead; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7086/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is aware of concerns that the closure of schools has impacted hardest upon families who have children with

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complex needs whose wellbeing and engagement with learning depend very much on the routine of school and their relationships with other students, teachers and Special Needs Assistants.

They have also lost out on specialist supports during this closure period.

My Department has taken a number of initiatives to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

These include –

- Guidance issued to all schools to support the ongoing learning of children with special educational needs and children who are at risk of disadvantage;

- Guidance and resources developed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on supporting children with special educational needs

- €10m in ICT grant funding to schools towards the purchase of technology and devices to support students at risk of educational disadvantage.

- Continued funding of Home Tuition or, where this is not possible, flexibility to bank hours for use at a later time in the year

- Resources to support good mental health and wellbeing amongst students produced by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

- To help schools plan for the new academic year, schools have been informed that their SNA allocation is being frozen at this year's level and there is provision for additionality where this might be required. No school will therefore have a lower allocation for the next school year.

- The Middletown Centre for Autism has developed a range of online resources for children and young people with Autism and their parents on education provision in the Home.

Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 health crisis, it is not possible to deliver the normal July Provision programme in the same way and at the same time as in other years.

However my Department is planning for 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.

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.

Planning is underway and consultations with stakeholders have commenced. The willingness of schools, teachers and SNAs to participate are key to the provision of a summer education programme.

An announcement will be made as soon as possible.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

Questions - Written Answers

117. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if an additional teacher will be appointed at a school (details supplied) to improve the pupil-teacher ratio at the school; and the status of the application for additional accommodation, including a purpose built special class at the school. [7104/20]

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 submitted an appeal to the Primary Staffing Appeals Board. The Appeals Board has deemed the appeal ineligible under the criteria set out in Circular 18/2020 and the school has been notified of this decision.

The Primary Staffing Appeals Board operates independently of the Department and its decision is final.

I can confirm that my Department is in receipt of an application for additional school accommodation for the school referred to by the Deputy. Once the application has been assessed, the school authority will be contacted directly with a decision.

Special Educational Needs

118. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the outcome of the review of the July provision programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7127/20]

277. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the application process for the July provision programme; the details of the planned expansion of the programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8037/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 118 and 277 together.

My Department is aware of concerns that the closure of schools has impacted hardest upon families who have children with complex needs whose wellbeing and engagement with learning depend very much on the routine of school and their relationships with other students, teachers and Special Needs Assistants.

They have also lost out on specialist supports during this closure period.

My Department has taken a number of initiatives to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

These include –

- Guidance issued to all schools to support the ongoing learning of children with special educational needs and children who are at risk of disadvantage;

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- Guidance and resources developed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on supporting children with special educational needs

- €10m in ICT grant funding to schools towards the purchase of technology and devices to support students at risk of educational disadvantage.

- Continued funding of Home Tuition or, where this is not possible, flexibility to bank hours for use at a later time in the year

- Resources to support good mental health and wellbeing amongst students produced by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

- To help schools plan for the new academic year, schools have been informed that their SNA allocation is being frozen at this year's level and there is provision for additionality where this might be required. No school will therefore have a lower allocation for the next school year.

- The Middletown Centre for Autism has developed a range of online resources for children and young people with Autism and their parents on education provision in the Home.

Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 health crisis, it is not possible to deliver the normal July Provision programme in the same way and at the same time as in other years.

However my Department is planning for 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.

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.

Planning is underway and consultations with stakeholders have commenced. The willingness of schools, teachers and SNAs to participate are key to the provision of a summer education programme.

An announcement will be made as soon as possible.

School Staff

119. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated full-year cost of providing 10,000 extra release days for teaching principals in primary schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7128/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Budget 2020 is the third successive budget to provide for an increase in the number of principal release days. One additional release day will be allocated to each school with a teaching principal with effect from 1st September 2020. This will bring the number of release days to 19, 25 and 31, depending on the size of school. This is an increase from 14, 18 and 22 days since 2015. In addition, a further four additional release days are allocated to schools with special classes.

There are arrangements in place for schools to cluster their principal release days into a full-

time post which will assist teaching principals to more effectively plan their release days for the benefit of the school.

Providing 10,000 additional release days would cost in the region of €2.64m per annum.

State Examinations

120. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the meaning of teachers' estimated marks from each school being adjusted to bring them into line with the expected distribution for the school; if this means that the previous year's results of a school will have an input on 2020 results; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7164/20]

133. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to ensure the involvement of independent expert advice in the development of the model which will be used within his Department to adjust calculated grades; if such a consultation has already taken place, the nature of the consultation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7182/20]

213. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the person or body that designed the system outlined in the document A Guide to Calculated Grades for Leaving Certificate students 2020; and if alternatives were considered. [7737/20]

218. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason for the function of ranking students in the calculated grades system; the reason this is necessary; and if alternatives were or still can be considered. [7742/20]

276. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the details in relation to the calculated grades system; the percentage mark provided by the teacher; the reason it cannot be reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8032/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 120, 133, 213, 218 and 276 together.

A Calculated Grade is a grade that can be provided to students following the combination of school information about a student's expected performance in an examination and national data available in relation to the performance of students in examinations over a period of time.

A calculated grade results from the combination of two data sets:

- A school-based estimation of an overall percentage mark and ranking to be awarded to a student in a particular subject.

- Data available from the State Examinations Commission – this includes data on past performance of students in each school and nationally.

The combination of these data sets through a process of national standardisation can determine the grade to be awarded to each student in each subject, thereby resulting in a calculated grade.

Full details regarding the operation of the Calculated Grades system, including National Standardisation have been issued to schools and students.

The National Standardisation process used will not impose any predetermined score on any individual or class.

My Department has been engaging with the expertise and professional experience that is

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available including through the Advisory Group. The calculated grades model has been developed with the advice and expertise of my own Department's staff, including the professional expertise of the Inspectorate, the State Examinations Commission, the Education Research Centre as well as an international expert, Dr. Fernando Cartwright, formerly of Statistics Canada.

An independent Steering Committee chaired by Dr. Áine Lawlor, former Director of the Teaching Council, will oversee the quality and integrity of the calculated grades system.

State Examinations

121. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when students that wish to appeal their predicted grade and sit the exam at a later date will get the opportunity to do so; if he has considered alternative methods to facilitate sitting the exams in order that students do not have to wait a prolonged period of time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7165/20]

235. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his Department has reviewed the possibility of those that choose to sit the leaving certificate in 2020 being permitted to attend college in 2020 if Covid-19 were to significantly stabilise; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7866/20]

239. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the date for a written leaving certificate to take place in 2020. [7873/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 121, 235 and 239 together.

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 including the State Examinations Commission 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.

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.

State Examinations

122. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the provisions being made for leaving certificate students that have been home schooled and may not have ever sat a formal exam in a formal school environment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7166/20]

124. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which students that sit non-curricular subjects such as Polish, Romanian and Russian will be accommodated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7168/20]

134. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the process by which a calculated grade will be provided to students that study a subject independently of a school. [7183/20]

Questions - Written Answers

163. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the leaving certificate for external candidates (details supplied). [7361/20]

170. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a hotline will be set up to assist external students (details supplied) in view of the fact they have not been contacted in relation to the leaving certificate 2020; if they will be written to; and if an announcement will be made in relation to the way in which grades for these students will be calculated. [7414/20]

206. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which the predictive grading system will work for leaving certificate students that are currently home schooled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7719/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 122, 124, 134, 163, 170 and 206 together.

Where a student is studying one or more subjects outside of a recognised school, every effort should be made by the school to provide an estimated mark where the principal is confident that there is sufficient evidence of the student's achievement to make an objective judgment. 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. All reasonable efforts should be made to obtain a satisfactory evidence base. This includes situations where students are studying subjects outside of school, including the non-curricular languages.

In the case of students taking a subject outside school, the detailed guidance for schools published on 21st May 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.

For students in receipt of home tuition with an association to the school, the guidance published on 21st May will provide information for school authorities to engage with the home tutor in arriving at a decision.

If the student is not being taught by a registered teacher, the principal will need to consider whether there is sufficient evidence on which to base an estimate. If there is not sufficient evidence, then it is highly unlikely that the Department will be able to generate a calculated grade for that subject.

In general, 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.

Where it is not possible to provide a calculated grade students will have the opportunity to sit the 2020 Leaving Certificate examination at a later date when it is safe to do so.

State Examinations

123. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which students that change levels late in the academic year will be accommodated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7167/20]

159. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which it is planned to use predicted grades for leaving certificate students that only moved to a new school

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in December 2019 and have never met their Irish and history teacher in view of the fact they were on maternity leave when they started in their new school; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7319/20]

166. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the full arrangements in place in relation to students that were on the leaving certificate applied course; the arrangements in place for attendance; the provision which can be made to facilitate students in these situations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7385/20]

187. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a practical project will be examined as part of the grading for results in relation to the leaving certificate. [7548/20]

190. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the arrangements for predictive marking for students that suffer from mental health issues (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7585/20]

192. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which a secondary student that does five subjects through school and two outside of school will have predicted grades for the two additional subjects when they do the subjects independently and autonomously; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7596/20]

211. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if CPD for teachers was formed as part of contingency planning for the State examinations; and if so, when it will be available. [7735/20]

217. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on whether the process his Department has followed in arriving at the announcement of the calculated grades model on 8 May 2020 was adequate in view of the fact that schools, principals and teachers are still awaiting clarification and a detailed guidance document. [7741/20]

296. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the process for marking leaving certificate students if the teacher makes a professional assessment that they are not familiar enough with the student or their capacities and for the student to highlight these issues in such a case. [8209/20]

302. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which the calculated grades system will apply to students sitting the leaving certificate outside of a secondary school setting and are being facilitated by schools or further education colleges while studying independently; and if these students will have no option but to sit the exam at a later date yet to be announced and will be unable to take up third-level education in the 2020/2021 academic year. [8260/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 123, 159, 166, 187, 190, 192, 211, 217, 296 and 302 together. I published detailed guidance for schools on calculated grades on 21 May. The document sets out information on the process of estimating marks for students to receive calculated grades, and this has been sent to all schools. The document, together with Frequently Asked Questions, are available on my Department's website. Further guidance and resources are being developed to support the implementation of Calculated Grades. These include an instructional video for teachers and information leaflets for schools and for parents/guardians.

Teachers are asked to use their professional judgement, drawing on existing records and available evidence to arrive at an estimated mark for each student.

Questions - Written Answers

If a student is new to a class or school, then the teacher should consult the previous teacher to obtain any relevant documentation. 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. All reasonable efforts should be made to obtain a satisfactory evidence base.

An on-line portal for students to confirm the subject level at which they initially entered for the examinations, or to change to a different level, is available since yesterday, Tuesday 26th May.

Leaving Certificate Applied students will be provided with calculated grades for subjects, tasks and vocational specialisms due to be completed in 2020.

Where a student is studying one or more subjects outside of a recognised school, every effort should be made by the school to provide an estimated mark where the principal is confident that there is sufficient evidence of the student's achievement to make an objective judgement.

For subjects with a practical component, the overall estimate will include the mark that the teacher thinks would have been achieved if it had been marked in the usual way. There is one exception to this: in the case of Home Economics – Scientific and Social, the journal component has already been marked by the SEC, and this mark will not be adjusted.

I would like to reiterate that 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. Teacher professional judgement facilitates incorporating a range of available evidence as to the likely performance of students. Teachers know their students and are able to balance a variety of evidence in arriving at a professional judgement.

Question No. 124 answered with Question No. 122.

State Examinations

125. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the details of the advice he received which prompted his decision to rescind the leaving certificate oral and practical marks which were previously awarded 100%; if he will publish this advice; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7169/20]

214. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason for selecting the calculated grades system. [7738/20]

293. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the details of the design of the guide for calculated grades for the 2020 leaving certificate; if alternatives were considered; and if he will address the decision to proceed with the system that was chosen. [8196/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 125, 214 and 293 together.

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. The decision to postpone the Leaving Certificate was taken following an assessment of public health advice, advice from NEPS and other information including the State Examinations Commission's considerations of the implications for holding the exams in July and August. 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

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students, In July and August.

The system of calculated grades that has been put in place will allow a student to progress to the next stage of their life in a timely fashion. Students will also have the right to sit the examinations at a later stage when it is safe to hold them in the normal way.

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 Leaving Certificate subjects 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.

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 works. Detailed guidance for teachers on the operation of the calculated grades system was published and issued to schools on 21 May.

When it was thought possible to proceed with 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. An estimated mark for these subject components should be based on the assumption that the components would have proceeded and been marked in the normal manner. 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.

School Staff

126. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will publish the guidelines previously mentioned to protect teachers and school staff from lobbying and canvassing on behalf of particular students; if he has considered appropriate sanctions for such transgressions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7170/20]

141. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the powers available to his Department to protect teachers from canvassing without primary legislation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7191/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 126 and 141 together.

I published detailed guidance for schools on calculated grades on 21 May. The document sets out information on the process of estimating marks for students to receive calculated grades, and has been sent to all schools. The guidance contains specific advice on student-teacher contact and fairness in the calculated grades model.

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 follow the Department's specific procedures and must not under any circumstances discuss with or disclose to any student or parents or guardians of any student the estimated marks that the school is submitting. Conversely, students and parents or guardians must not contact a

teacher or other member of staff to discuss the estimated marks.

Where an attempt to contact or engage in discussion persists the teacher must report this to the school principal, and provide a written record of the contact. The record will be maintained by the principal until the conclusion of any potential review or appeal process associated with the student's calculated grades. The principal must notify the Department that the school has a record of contact. The Department will request written affirmation from the principal that all procedures at school level were followed despite the alleged contact before the student's marks and ranking can be processed.

Student Support Schemes

127. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans in place for leaving certificate students in 2021 in view of the fact they have lost considerable classroom time and are likely to be impacted going forward; if he has received advice regarding this cohort of students; if he plans to seek advice on the way in which the workload for these students will be reduced commensurate with the time they have lost in school; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7171/20]

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 April 22nd 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 demonstrated 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

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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.

School Staff

128. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the measures being taken in schools to facilitate staff that have underlying health conditions and may not be in a position to return to work in September 2020 should schools reopen at that time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7172/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The general principles to apply to the management of COVID-19 includes the safety and welfare of employees and the minimisation of the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning.

The current arrangements in place for school staff, including those with underlying medical conditions, are outlined in my Department's Circular Letters which are available along with other relevant information on the Covid-19 page of my Department's website.

Because of the diversity of Institutions providing education, the opening of such Institutions needs to be carefully managed and planning has already commenced in my Department. This process will include consultation with stakeholders, take into account the experience of other countries and the ongoing public health advice. The position of staff with underlying medical conditions will be considered as part of this process.

Teaching Qualifications

129. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the arrangements in place for students that are in the final year of their masters for secondary school teaching in circumstances in which Irish is one of their subjects and they have not had the opportunity to complete their Gaeltacht placement due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and if they will still be awarded the relevant qualification from the National Teaching Council. [7178/20]

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Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Both my Department and I are aware of the matter referred to by the Deputy.

I wish to advise that this matter is under active consideration by the Teaching Council at present and the Council have advised my Department that a statement will issue shortly on this matter.

The Teaching Council is the statutory body charged with determining standards for the teaching profession and for accrediting programmes of initial teacher education.

Special Education Review

130. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the ongoing review of the July provision scheme; if the potential for the scheme to run in August 2020 has been examined; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7179/20]

143. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the provision of further educational resources to children with special educational needs over the summer months outside of the July provision scheme is being considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7193/20]

152. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he has examined the potential for additional distance learning supports over the summer months; if so, the findings of the examination; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7229/20]

241. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the review of the July provision scheme. [7875/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 130, 143, 152 and 241 together.

My Department is aware of concerns that the closure of schools has impacted hardest upon families who have children with complex needs whose wellbeing and engagement with learning depend very much on the routine of school and their relationships with other students, teachers and Special Needs Assistants.

They have also lost out on specialist supports during this closure period.

My Department has taken a number of initiatives to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

These include –

- Guidance issued to all schools to support the ongoing learning of children with special educational needs and children who are at risk of disadvantage;

- Guidance and resources developed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on supporting children with special educational needs

- €10m in ICT grant funding to schools towards the purchase of technology and devices to support students at risk of educational disadvantage.

- Continued funding of Home Tuition or, where this is not possible, flexibility to bank hours for use at a later time in the year

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- Resources to support good mental health and wellbeing amongst students produced by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

- To help schools plan for the new academic year, schools have been informed that their SNA allocation is being frozen at this year's level and there is provision for additionality where this might be required. No school will therefore have a lower allocation for the next school year.

- The Middletown Centre for Autism has developed a range of online resources for children and young people with Autism and their parents on education provision in the Home.

Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 health crisis, it is not possible to deliver the normal July Provision programme in the same way and at the same time as in other years.

However my Department is planning for 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.

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.

Planning is underway and consultations with stakeholders have commenced. The willingness of schools, teachers and SNAs to participate are key to the provision of a summer education programme.

An announcement will be made as soon as possible.

School Equipment

131. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the procurement of information technology equipment through his Department following an announcement of top-up funding on 22 April 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7180/20]

244. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the provision of funds for information communications technology equipment to schools including the procurement of equipment via his Department. [7878/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 131 and 244 together.

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 €50m has recently been issued which includes the €10m referred to by the deputy.

This additional €10m ICT top-up funding which has also issued, is part of the broader Digital Strategy investment. Schools have been very innovative in meeting the challenges posed by school closures and I made this funding available at this time to assist schools to support stu-

Questions - Written Answers

dents at risk of educational disadvantage due to COVID-19 school closures. Schools have been asked to use this funding to support students where, due to lack of access to digital devices, are disadvantaged in their engagement with the school's remote teaching and learning where this is provided by digital means.

Schools know their students and are best placed to identify how to best support their student to engage with learning during the current public health crises. The ICT Grant funding facilitates schools to put in place the supports needed to meet the needs of individual students to actively engage with remote learning. Decisions as to what equipment is to be acquired and procurement of same is the responsibility of schools.

Students, pupils and teachers can engage with remote learning using various digital devices including Desktop PCs, Laptops, Tablets and Chromebooks. Where schools have determined that laptops are required and in order to ameliorate current laptop supply chain challenges for laptops, my Department has advised schools of two mechanisms to aggregate purchase orders for laptops from schools 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 established under two Single Provider Frameworks, for the provision laptops for schools, based on OGP Frameworks which 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/>.

Third Level Admissions

132. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the consultation which has taken place to date on the provision of additional spaces at third-level institutions for the coming term; if agreement has been reached that these places will be made available to current leaving certificate students; if additional supports will be provided to third-level institutions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7181/20]

248. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the provision of additional places at third-level institutions in 2020; the additional supports that will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7882/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 132 and 248 together.

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.

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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.

The projected financial impact of Covid-19 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 Covid-19 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.

Question No. 133 answered with Question No. 120.

Question No. 134 answered with Question No. 122.

State Examinations

135. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the planning underway for students that will take leaving certificate exams in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7184/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The State Examinations Commission has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

Special Educational Needs

136. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the additional supports which have been provided through his Department to pupils with special educational needs; if additional supports are being developed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7185/20]

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:

<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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<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

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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.

School Closures

137. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his Department has undertaken an examination of the ongoing closure of schools on educational attainment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7186/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): A key priority for my Department is to minimise the impact of school closures on the educational attainment of young persons due to the Covid 19 crisis. We are currently undertaking a number of actions to ensure this.

Guidance has already issued to primary and post-primary 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.

This guidance has been developed in consultation with the management bodies and unions from both sectors which will continue for the foreseeable future.

The aim of distant learning approaches 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.

It is recognised that schools continue to be best placed to make decisions about how to support and educate all their learners during this period. Analysis of the gaps in learning for all their learners and how these gaps will be addressed can begin before the school term ends but in practice, it may not be possible to determine, except in broad terms, until students return to the classroom. My Department will provide guidance and assistance to schools.

With regard to the reopening of schools in the autumn a group has also been established

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within my Department. At present 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.

My department will continue to issue advice and guidance to schools as appropriate, in accordance with the advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team, in order to mitigate any impact on the educational attainment of young persons.

Departmental Websites

138. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if answers to non-individual specific queries submitted to his Department on calculated grades for the leaving certificate will be published on the Departmental website. [7187/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department has published Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) in regard to the Leaving Certificate 2020, including calculated grades, on its website. The FAQ are updated regularly. There is also a detailed guide to calculated grades for Leaving Certificate 2020 for schools and students on my Department's website.

Third Level Education

139. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will provide an additional deadline to CAO applicants for 2020 applications (details supplied). [7189/20]

279. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to the fact that certain leaving certificate students missed the deadline to apply for the CAO; if he will arrange for late applications to be accepted in view of the extenuating circumstances these students are dealing with arising from Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8052/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 139 and 279 together.

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. Work is ongoing to ensure that the third level entry process can progress as smoothly and equitably as possible.

However 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

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found on their website www.cao.ie

State Examinations Commission

140. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if staff from the State Examinations Commission have been seconded to the unit of his Department tasked with the adjustment of calculated grades. [7190/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Following my announcement on Friday 8th May regarding the calculated grade optional model for the Leaving Certificate, LCVP and Leaving Certificate Applied examinations, an Executive Office has been established within my Department to deliver the calculated grades model in 2020. This requires the temporary secondment of a small number of staff from the SEC to that office to achieve this objective. The Office was formally established on Monday 18 May, 2020 and to date, sixteen officials have been seconded from the State Examinations Commission to the Executive Office. Some secondments will also take place for shorter periods; for example, twenty one staff have also been seconded for a number of days to support the online candidate helpline. Further consideration will be given on an ongoing basis to the secondment of any additional staff as required.

Question No. 141 answered with Question No. 126.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

142. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he has reviewed the recent advice considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of Covid-19 by the WHO; the implications of this advice in the Irish context for preparations for the reopening of schools in September 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7192/20]

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

My Department is engaging and working with the education partners and relevant stakeholders on planning arrangements for the re-opening of schools in accordance with the time-frame outlined in the roadmap. 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.

These will now be worked through in detail as part of the development of the roadmap for reopening schools. This work will also be informed by guidance and experience from other jurisdictions and from advice published by international bodies such as the World Health Organisation and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).

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.

Question No. 143 answered with Question No. 130.

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Special Educational Needs Staff

144. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of plans to allow SNAs to provide a service through their existing schools in view of issues identified with the HSE vetting process. [7196/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Minister announced on 1st April a contingency plan for all Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) to be available for a new temporary assignment scheme as part of the Government's response to Covid-19. In the normal course of events, the majority of children with disabilities access multidisciplinary therapy services through the HSE. Many of these services have been scaled down during the Covid-19 emergency situation as staff are redeployed. The reduction in these services, combined with school closures are putting substantial demands on children with disabilities and their families. It is intended that the temporary assignment of SNAs to support children's disability services during this public health emergency will help to alleviate the stress being experienced by these vulnerable families.

My Department's '*Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs*' document provides a framework for SEN Teachers and SNAs to maintain contact with SEN students and to provide appropriate learning support. It is acknowledged and welcomed that many SNAs have been engaged in such work through their schools since the closure period began. It has been confirmed to school management that, in the interim period pending the assignment of an individual SNA to the HSE, that SNA is available to support their allocated students through their school.

The HSE has now finalised the details of a new service which SNAs will provide during the school closure period. The HSE has started assigning SNAs to families and children identified in their services.

There has been close cooperation between the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Health and the HSE in establishing and managing the scheme to date. The Departments and the HSE hold weekly meetings with the Education Division of Fórsa (the trade union representing SNAs) to resolve any issues of concern.

SNAs will be asked to provide support to those students in receipt of HSE Disability services by way of remote working through the use of telephones, smart phones or laptops. They will work under the guidance and direction of the child's 'key point of contact' who will be a clinician such as a speech and language therapist, psychologist or occupational therapist who is familiar with the student and will explain what support each student and family might require. The key point of contact will provide strategies for working with the child / family and will signpost the SNA towards any resources required. Communication channels between the school and the SNA will be facilitated where appropriate to ensure that SNAs can receive guidance where educational issues arise during the course of the suite of supports being provided by the HSE teams during this period.

SNAs will be matched with students, and wherever possible this will be their own allocated student(s). If this is not possible, SNAs may then be matched to support children with whom they are not familiar. Students and families requiring the greatest level of support will be prioritised.

To ensure that SNAs receive appropriate support and have regular opportunities to engage with the HSE's multidisciplinary teams, SNAs will be able to access resources at the relevant HSE or disability service premises and will be provided with a letter identifying them as an es-

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sential worker to facilitate travel to these centres.

It is intended that the work of the SNAs will be underpinned by dedicated ICT supports. Therefore, where the SNA prefers to work remotely or has an underlying health condition or particular circumstances that impact on their ability to leave their home and has access to the appropriate technology this can be facilitated with the agreement of the Service Manager and key point of contact.

The HSE will provide induction for all SNAs who are asked to participate in the new service. Where possible they will ask SNAs to attend one of their offices to do this but where SNAs are self-isolating, have underlying health conditions or have childcare or other caring responsibilities, the induction can be done remotely.

The HSE are providing a dedicated IT platform which will allow the HSE to match SNAs to children / families. This platform will also allow the SNA to log their interactions with the family and to report on same. SNAs can use their own phone, tablet or laptop to carry out this work, and access to appropriate resources and technology will also be available at the HSE / disability premises.

At all times the HSE will take account of the public health restrictions in place and the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business published by Government on 1 May.

Apprenticeship Programmes

145. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will address a matter regarding apprenticeships (details supplied). [7208/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan): The Department of Education and Skills, SOLAS and the education and training providers are actively working to put in place alternative learning and assessment solutions for apprentices while maintaining the quality and integrity of the apprenticeship programme.

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. For Phase 4 and 6 apprentices, this will be in June 2020. An initial communication issued to relevant craft apprentices and employers on the 15th May, 2020. Guidelines which explain the arrangements for alternative assessment have since been issued to these apprentices.

During the months of March, April and May 2020 inclusive, apprentices who have been prevented in engaging in their on-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.

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.

State Examinations

146. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the consideration that

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has been given to the HPAT exam and the way in which this may adversely affect their predicted grades; if the HPAT score can be carried forward to the following year for those who choose to avail of written exams; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7211/20]

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.

Students who choose to sit the 2020 Leaving Certificate exams when it is safe to do so and who receive an improved CAO offer on foot of these results will receive a deferred offer to start their course in the 2021/22 academic year. However such offers are part of the 2020 application cycle, and will use the results of the 2020 HPAT sitting.

Education Policy

147. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will develop a single web platform for online skills learning in line with the recently established skills toolkit in the United Kingdom. [7224/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): College is a leading learning platform funded by SOLAS that provides a range of high quality interactive online learning and training courses in business, project management, information technology, graphic design, web design, digital marketing, software development and basic computer literacy. eCollege courses are temporarily being made available free of charge as an additional support to those impacted by Covid-19 containment measures. The courses may benefit those already doing a FET course who would like to augment their learning, those who have recently become unemployed or had their hours reduced, and those wishing to upskill and reskill. Courses are designed to give a flexible response to the specific skills needs of individuals who require training interventions with certification to assist them to re-enter or upskill in the labour market.

One of the recommendations of the Indecon Review of Career Guidance centred on strengthening and promoting a user friendly centralised careers portal. Information in relation to educational provision, including online provision would form part of the information populating any such portal.

On foot of the Review of Career Guidance, a Taskforce comprised of senior officials from my Department was established to oversee the implementation of the recommendations of the review. The Taskforce has met five times to date and is progressing with the work assigned to it. The Taskforce has considered how best to enable the coordination of guidance services within the Department, while also seeking to ensure the provision of the quality careers information recommended by Indecon. It is expected that proposals in this regard will be discussed with stakeholders shortly.

In the interim, the extensive range of further education and training courses offered across the country can be found at www.fetchcourses.ie. Comprehensive, annually updated information is also provided about further and higher education and training options in Ireland through Qualifax, Ireland's National Learners' Database the "one stop shop" for learners and the public.

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Departmental Data

148. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the units in his Department currently working remotely; the units still in situ; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7225/20]

149. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the activities of his Department which have been curtailed as a result of the transition to working from home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7226/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 148 and 149 together.

Due to the recommendations of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) officials at my Department are in the main working from home remotely.

In advance of the pandemic restriction measures officials at the HR Unit of my Department engaged with the management of the various line sections within my Department in order to identify positions that could be accommodated with remote working and those positions where attendance at the office location was essential.

Under the Departments Business Continuity Plan, certain areas are identified as being essential such as IT, Payroll, and HR and these sections have measures in place with a combination of limited onsite working and remote working. Other areas of the Department in the main are operating remotely but some like the Pensions Unit and Payroll have arrangements in place to facilitate essential staff working from the office while observing all the relevant health and safety guidelines and advice. Arrangements are also in place to enable staff attend the offices in our various locations for short periods to drop off work completed remotely, view hard copy files, avail of printing facilities or collect new work to be completed remotely.

The arrangements that have been put in place have broadly enabled my Department to continue to deliver its services to the public. While certain key functions have temporarily ceased such as school inspection visits, and educational psychologist visits to schools as they are currently closed and the staff involved have been assigned other areas of work within those units. Although unable to up to recently, some Professional and Technical Staff of my Department have recommenced site visits in relation to essential school building projects.

Officials at my Department will continue to deliver essential services and they have been innovative to ensure such services are carried out. The HR Unit in conjunction with the Corporate Services Unit of my the Department will continue to monitor the situation in order that the Department can continue to deliver its services and plan for a return to business in accordance with all appropriate advice from the Government and the Health Authorities.

School Curriculum

150. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he accepts the findings of a recent report by the OECD (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7227/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): PISA aims to measure how well students, at age, 15, are prepared to meet the challenges they may encounter in future life, including education. In PISA 2018, 5,577 Irish students completed the assessment in Ireland. In addition to the 3 the tests of reading literacy, mathematics and science, questionnaires ad-

ministered in Ireland included:

- the core student questionnaire
- optional short questionnaire for students on ICT

The information in the report referred to by the Deputy stems from responses from both students and teachers across the OECD countries to the optional short questionnaire on ICT for students. My Department notes and accepts the data in that context. There are no specific findings in the text accompanying the tables from the PISA survey relating to Ireland. The report concludes:

“In this moment of crisis, digital technology holds great promise to provide learners with access to high quality learning. However, most education systems need to pay close attention to ensure that technology does not amplify existing inequalities in access and quality of learning further. This is not only a matter of providing access to technology and open learning resources, but will also require maintaining effective social relationships between families, teachers and students, particularly for those students who lack the resilience, learning strategies or engagement to learn on their own. Technology can amplify the work of great teachers, but it will not replace them.”

As the Deputy will be aware, the Digital Strategy for Schools outlines my Department’s vision to realise the potential of digital technologies to enhance teaching, learning and assessment so that Ireland’s young people become engaged thinkers, active learners, knowledge constructors and global citizens to participate fully in society and the economy. A central theme of the Strategy is Teacher Professional Development, and a Digital Learning Framework, supported by an extensive programme of CPD, is now available. This Framework will enable teachers and schools to progress in their usage of digital technologies depending on their own circumstances and to identify their particular support requirements. My Department recognises that the embedding of digital technologies can enhance teaching and learning, through appropriate supports grounded in informed pedagogical best practice.

From the outset of school closures required under Covid-19 measures, schools and teachers were advised of the requirement to effectively engage with parents and learners to ensure continuity of teaching and learning for all their students. To enable this, extensive support material on distance learning has been made available through the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), including the delivery of Webinars on relevant topics. My Department has published guidance for schools and teachers, to support remote learning and the continuity of teaching and learning for all students including students with special education needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage. Guidance has also been published for parents and is available on my Department’s website in 12 languages. Schools are advised to ensure that in their approach to providing for the continuity of learning due consideration is given to put in place alternative arrangements where solutions involving digital technology may not be appropriate or available, to the learner. Key to this guidance is the requirement for ongoing engagement between schools, teachers, parents and learners.

€50m ICT grant funding has now been issued to schools, and this can be used by schools to prioritise requirements arising out of the Covid-19 school closures, to support remote learning. This can include arrangements to loan school computing devices to teachers and learners who experience difficulties in accessing appropriate devices as well as putting in place appropriate learning platforms to deliver remote learning.

My Department continues to engage with stakeholders including management bodies, teacher representatives, parent and students representatives during the current period of school

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closures to provide supports to enable the continuation of teaching and learning.

School Curriculum

151. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the monitoring undertaken by his Department of the number of children that do not have access to broadband or to high enough quality broadband to engage in digital learning initiatives; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7228/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Since the announcement that schools would close and the extension of that closure, my Department has provided guidance to schools and teachers in the education sector to ensure that they continue to work and to engage with their students to continue the delivery of education. A series of guidance notes to support schools to effectively support and engage with their students are published on my Department's website at: <https://www.education.ie/en/covid-19/#guidance>. Further guidance will continue to be compiled to address the various challenges that arise for schools in providing programmes of continued learning in the remote learning environment. Various surveys and studies has conducted across the education system has informed the development of guidance.

Schools have been asked to be conscious of students who may not have access to online facilities and to consider this actively in their responses. As part of reopening of society roadmap and the lifting of current restrictions, school and college buildings are now opened for access by teachers for the organisation and distribution of remote learning in line with public health advice and restrictions.

Officials in my Department have liaised with colleagues in the DCCAE to raise the issue of barriers to connectivity impacting access to remote learning. Minister Bruton has announced a package of additional supports from the telecoms companies including that access to health-care and educational resource websites identified by the Government will be zero-rated for all customers where technically feasible. The Telecommunications industry has also introduced update for data limits for consumers to assist their customers during the Covid-19 to access online services without exceeding their data limits.

The Department will continue to work with the education partners to address challenges where digital and remote learning options may not be possible.

Information as to the broadband connectivity available to individual children in their homes would not be available to the Department. In the context of the National Broadband Plan Intervention area implementation, the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment are addressing the needs of those areas with poor connectivity.

Question No. 152 answered with Question No. 130.

Covid-19 Pandemic

153. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the meetings that have taken place to date on the reopening of schools in September 2020. [7230/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): On the 1 May 2020, the Taoiseach announced as part of the "Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business" that schools

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will commence opening on a phased basis at the beginning of the 2020/2021 academic year.

My Department is engaging and working with the education partners and relevant stakeholders on planning arrangements for the re-opening of schools in accordance with the time-frame outlined in the roadmap and all decisions on how schools are to safely re-open and operate will be consistent with public health advice. There has been a meeting of the primary education forum and a meeting with post-primary stakeholders which took place last week. The Department has also been engaging with management bodies on a weekly basis to prepare guidance for the school sector on a range of issues, and this guidance has been published on the Department's website.

In addition 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.

These will now be worked through in detail as part of the development of the roadmap for re-opening schools. Ongoing meetings with stakeholders will be arranged as the Roadmap for Reopening Schools is developed.

Covid-19 Pandemic

154. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on the recent statement that the reopening of schools is one of the safest things that can be done; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7231/20]

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 public health advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and the Department of Health.

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.

My Department is engaging and working with the education partners and relevant stakeholders on planning arrangements for the re-opening of schools in accordance with the time-frame outlined in the roadmap and all decisions on how schools are to safely re-open and operate will be consistent with 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.

These will now be worked through in detail as part of the development of the roadmap for re-opening schools. This work will also be informed by guidance and experience from other jurisdictions and from advice published by international bodies such as the World Health Organisation and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).

Covid-19 Pandemic

155. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will commission a report on the short, medium and long-term impact of school closures on the educational

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development of young persons. [7232/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): A key priority for my Department is to minimise the impact of school closures on the educational development of young persons due to the Covid 19 crisis, and we are currently undertaking a number of actions to ensure this.

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.

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.

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. The aim of 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.

My department will keep this situation under review and will continue to issue advice and guidance to schools as appropriate, in accordance with the advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team, in order to mitigate any impact on the educational development of young persons.

School Staff

156. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to the case of a school (details supplied) that lost the placement of a mainstream teacher due to falling short in projected enrolment numbers for September 2020 by one pupil; if he will review this decision in view of the potential for further enrolment between now and September 2020, the very small margin upon which this decision was made and the denial of an appeal by the primary staffing appeals board; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7268/20]

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 submitted an appeal to the Primary Staffing Appeals Board. The Appeals Board has deemed the appeal ineligible under the criteria set out in Circular 18/2020 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 Accommodation

157. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the planning and procurement for the installation of appropriate prefabs has been organised for a school (details supplied) to ensure that the school can open in line with other secondary schools when it is safe to do so, with appropriate space to facilitate social distancing and the teaching of a wide variety of subjects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7297/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): A planning application for the school to which the Deputy refers was lodged with the relevant local authority on 2 April 2020 and a decision is awaited. The tendering process for the procurement of prefabricated accommodation for the project is currently ongoing. It is envisaged that the school will open in suitable interim accommodation for the 2020/2021 academic year and that the accommodation to be provided will be in line with social distancing protocols.

Covid-19 Pandemic

158. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the provisions that will be made for students in the third year of college studying social care and who have been unable to complete their 400 hours, ten-week work placements due to Covid-19 in view of the fact there is a requirement that they need to complete their placements to allow them to progress to the fourth year of college to obtain a degree. [7318/20]

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

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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.

Question No. 159 answered with Question No. 123.

Special Educational Needs

160. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason the ASD unit at a school (details supplied) has been delayed in view of the fact all works have been completed at stage 2(a) in the process, including the obtaining of planning permission, fire certificates and disability access certificates; the way in which it will be progressed to stage 2(b) to allow the building go to e-tenders; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7321/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Deputy will be aware that the project to which he refers has been devolved for delivery to the school under my Department's Additional Accommodation Scheme.

I wish to clarify for the Deputy that my Department received a Stage 2b report from the school in question. My Department has sought clarification on the costings set out in that report and awaits the school's response to same.

Special Educational Needs

161. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the July provision will be sanctioned for a school (details supplied) attended by students with ASD; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7325/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is aware of concerns that the closure of schools has impacted hardest upon families who have children with complex needs whose wellbeing and engagement with learning depend very much on the routine of school and their relationships with other students, teachers and Special Needs Assistants.

They have also lost out on specialist supports during this closure period.

My Department has taken a number of initiatives to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

These include –

- Guidance issued to all schools to support the ongoing learning of children with special educational needs and children who are at risk of disadvantage;

- Guidance and resources developed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on supporting children with special educational needs

- €10m in ICT grant funding to schools towards the purchase of technology and devices to support students at risk of educational disadvantage.

- Continued funding of Home Tuition or, where this is not possible, flexibility to bank hours for use at a later time in the year

- Resources to support good mental health and wellbeing amongst students produced by the

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National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

- To help schools plan for the new academic year, schools have been informed that their SNA allocation is being frozen at this year's level and there is provision for additionality where this might be required. No school will therefore have a lower allocation for the next school year.

- The Middletown Centre for Autism has developed a range of online resources for children and young people with Autism and their parents on education provision in the Home.

Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 health crisis, it is not possible to deliver the normal July Provision programme in the same way and at the same time as in other years.

However my Department is planning for 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.

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.

Planning is underway and consultations with stakeholders have commenced. The willingness of schools, teachers and SNAs to participate are key to the provision of a summer education programme.

An announcement will be made as soon as possible.

Public Sector Pensions

162. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a reply to correspondence (details supplied) regarding a pension issue will issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7360/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is responsible for the administration of the pension schemes for teaching and certain non-teaching staff employed by Primary, Secondary and Community & Comprehensive schools who are paid on the payrolls operated by the Department. The individual concerned does not appear to have ever been on such payrolls, therefore would not be a member of any pension scheme administered by my officials. However, in an effort to assist this individual with her query, officials from my Department have contacted the person concerned and provided advice which I hope is of assistance to her.

Question No. 163 answered with Question No. 122.

Legislative Process

164. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the planned reform of the Higher Education Authority Act 1971; the consultation process involved; and if a response has issued from a university (details supplied) in relation to same. [7373/20]

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Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Higher Education Authority Act, 1971 established the Higher Education Authority (HEA), set out the functions of the HEA and provided for the governance of the HEA. The Act also provided that the HEA is the statutory funding authority for the universities, institutes of technology and a number of other designated institutions and provided for the financial monitoring of the designated higher education institutions by the HEA. The Act established the HEA as the advisory body to the Minister for Education and Skills in relation to the higher education sector.

An extensive consultation process has been undertaken by the Department of Education and Skills on the updating of the HEA legislation during 2018 and 2019. This consultation process commenced with a request for written submissions in July 2018. A consultation forum was held in November 2018 and those who participated in the consultation process and key stakeholders from the sector were invited to attend. A report of the 2018 consultation process and the response by the Department of Education and Skills to the views expressed and issues raised in the Consultation process was prepared. Following review by Government, this report of the Consultation process was published in July 2019. This report outlines the views expressed by participants in the 2018 written consultation process and at the consultation forum. It also provides the response by the Department of Education and Skills to the views expressed and issues raised in the consultation process and provides an overview of the proposed legislation. An outline of the Legislative Proposals for the reform of the Higher Education Act, 1971 was also published at the same time.

A further request for written submissions on the proposals for the development of the HEA legislation was issued in July 2019. The views of stakeholders on the consultation report and the legislative proposals were sought by the end of September 2019.

The university referenced participated in the consultation forum in November 2018 and also made a written submission as part of the July 2019 consultation process. The details of the consultation process and copies of all submissions are published on the Department of Education and Skills website.

<https://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Higher-Education/update-of-the-higher-education-authority-act-1971-public-consultation.html>

The Government approved the preparation of a General Scheme of a Bill to replace the Higher Education Authority Act, 1971 in July 2019. Work is ongoing in the development of the legislation taking into consideration the views received from the consultation process and further consultation undertaken with key stakeholders.

Student Accommodation

165. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position regarding the commencement of the 2020-21 college year; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that students will need to pay accommodation fees in July 2020 to cover the first semester; if he will instruct landlords on the way in which they should handle student accommodation for the coming year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7376/20]

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

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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.

Rental agreements between students and accommodation providers are a private matter, and neither I nor my Department have any remit to issue instructions in relation to the private rental market.

Question No. 166 answered with Question No. 123.

Special Educational Needs Staff

167. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if additional special needs assistants will be allocated to a school (details supplied). [7386/20]

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.

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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.

Schools Building Projects

168. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of a new school building for a school (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7395/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The school referred to by the Deputy has recently been assigned for delivery under my Department's Design and Build Programme. This delivery programme uses a professional external Project Manager to progress the project through the relevant stages of architectural planning and construction. The project will now enter the Architectural Planning phase.

Childcare Services

169. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the consideration being given to fund the wages of childcare workers to ensure reduced costs for parents and improve pay levels for childcare staff (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7411/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The issue raised by the Deputy does not come within the remit of my Department. Issues relating to the funding of childcare are a matter for my colleague the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.

Question No. 170 answered with Question No. 122.

Schools Building Projects

171. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of a school rebuilding project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7434/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Deputy will be aware from my response to a similar question last week that an internal inspection of the building to assess the extent to any additional works required on the school building has taken place. A written report of this inspection is awaited and a decision on how to proceed will be made thereafter.

Higher Education Institutions

172. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to

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address a matter in relation to the recommencement of third-level education (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7436/20]

233. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if it is planned that colleges and universities will commence their respective academic years as normal; if delays are expected; and if his Department has begun planning for a scenario in which they are not in a position to commence the academic year as normal. [7790/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 172 and 233 together.

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.

Student Accommodation

173. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will intervene in the ongoing dispute at the University of Limerick regarding refunds for students that have paid for campus accommodation and have not been able to use it for the past number of months. [7478/20]

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 it's not within my remit to direct any institution to offer a refund. I have also discussed this matter directly with the Chancellor of UL. I understand that the issue is currently under active consideration by the UL governing body, and that a decision will be made shortly.

Schools Building Projects

174. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the building of the new educate together primary school on Harcourt Terrace; if this project has been impacted by the current crisis; the timeline for commencement and completion of the project; and when the school will officially open. [7480/20]

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

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The Design Team have completed the pre-qualification process. It is currently anticipated that the project to which the Deputy refers will progress to tender stage later this year, with construction commencing early in 2021.

A tender stage normally takes between 7 and 8 months to complete.

Covid-19 Pandemic

175. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will consider offering children with disabilities a return to school before September 2020 as teachers are in place (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7486/20]

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.

My 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 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.

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.

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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

176. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on a proposal in respect of the July provision (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7497/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is aware of concerns that the closure of schools has impacted hardest upon families who have children with complex needs whose wellbeing and engagement with learning depend very much on the routine of school and their relationships with other students, teachers and Special Needs Assistants.

They have also lost out on specialist supports during this closure period.

My Department has taken a number of initiatives to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

These include –

- Guidance issued to all schools to support the ongoing learning of children with special educational needs and children who are at risk of disadvantage;

- Guidance and resources developed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on supporting children with special educational needs

- €10m in ICT grant funding to schools towards the purchase of technology and devices to support students at risk of educational disadvantage.

- Continued funding of Home Tuition or, where this is not possible, flexibility to bank hours for use at a later time in the year

- Resources to support good mental health and wellbeing amongst students produced by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

- To help schools plan for the new academic year, schools have been informed that their SNA allocation is being frozen at this year's level and there is provision for additionality where this might be required. No school will therefore have a lower allocation for the next school year.

- The Middletown Centre for Autism has developed a range of online resources for children and young people with Autism and their parents on education provision in the Home.

Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 health crisis, it is not possible to deliver the normal July Provision programme in the same way and at the same time as in other years.

However my Department is planning for 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.

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.

Planning is underway and consultations with stakeholders have commenced. The willingness of schools, teachers and SNAs to participate are key to the provision of a summer education programme.

An announcement will be made as soon as possible.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland

177. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if students of social care will be given clarity with regard to their placements; if they will not be held up from graduating as a result of placements being cancelled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7501/20]

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 and so that the position is clarified for students.

Special Educational Needs

178. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will provide clarity on the July provision for 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7503/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is aware of concerns that the closure of schools has impacted hardest upon families who have children with complex needs whose wellbeing and engagement with learning depend very much on the routine of school and their relationships with other students, teachers and Special Needs Assistants.

They have also lost out on specialist supports during this closure period.

My Department has taken a number of initiatives to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

These include –

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- Guidance issued to all schools to support the ongoing learning of children with special educational needs and children who are at risk of disadvantage;

- Guidance and resources developed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on supporting children with special educational needs

- €10m in ICT grant funding to schools towards the purchase of technology and devices to support students at risk of educational disadvantage.

- Continued funding of Home Tuition or, where this is not possible, flexibility to bank hours for use at a later time in the year

- Resources to support good mental health and wellbeing amongst students produced by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

- To help schools plan for the new academic year, schools have been informed that their SNA allocation is being frozen at this year's level and there is provision for additionality where this might be required. No school will therefore have a lower allocation for the next school year.

- The Middletown Centre for Autism has developed a range of online resources for children and young people with Autism and their parents on education provision in the Home.

Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 health crisis, it is not possible to deliver the normal July Provision programme in the same way and at the same time as in other years.

However my Department is planning for 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.

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.

Planning is underway and consultations with stakeholders have commenced. The willingness of schools, teachers and SNAs to participate are key to the provision of a summer education programme.

An announcement will be made as soon as possible.

Gaelcholáistí Issues

179. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a reply will issue to correspondence regarding a school (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7504/20]

185. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of a full immersion Gaelcholáiste (details supplied) for County Louth; if a decision can be expected in time for the beginning of the 2020/2021 school year; if not, if he will consider expediting the decision process with an appropriate deadline; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7540/20]

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Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 179 and 185 together.

I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department is in active discussion with An Foras Pátrúnachta in relation to a proposal for a Gaelcholáiste under the patronage of An Foras Pátrúnachta to also have a campus in County Louth. The parties are assessing options in Dundalk for the upcoming school year. All parties are conscious of the short timeframe to the start of the school year and I wish to advise the Deputy that every effort is being made to expedite this assessment. A response will issue to correspondence received in this regard.

Schools Building Projects

180. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the progress in relation to the new build at a school (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7523/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I can confirm to the Deputy that my Department has received a Stage 2b report from the school to which she refers. My Department will be in contact with the school directly once its review of this report has been completed.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

181. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a payment to a person (details supplied) will continue after they reach 66 years of age; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7528/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): An occupational pension awarded to a teacher on medical grounds will remain in payment when the retiree attains 66 years of age.

It should be noted that a teacher who is awarded a pension on medical grounds may not subsequently engage in teaching.

Where a full recovery is made and a teacher wishes to return to teaching or employment outside of teaching in the public or private sector, fresh medical evidence of fitness must be submitted for review by the Occupational Health Service (OHS) engaged by my Department. Where a teacher is deemed as no longer medically unfit to teach, payment of pension benefits will cease and will only resume at normal retirement age or the date on which the new contract of employment ends, whichever is the later; on resumption, benefits will be re-calculated without the additional years awarded as part of the initial retirement on grounds of ill health.

Covid-19 Pandemic

182. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the guidelines schools and principals will receive in terms of public health safety before they return to reopen schools. [7529/20]

183. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when he expects to be able to issue schools with public health requirement guidelines for the reopening of

schools. [7530/20]

219. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his Department will be issuing guidelines pertaining to the safe reopening of primary schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7745/20]

220. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if adjustments will be made on health and safety grounds to the pupil-teacher ratio operational in primary schools for the 2020/2021 academic year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7746/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 182, 183, 219 and 220 together.

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.

My Department is engaging and working with the education partners and relevant stakeholders on planning arrangements for the re-opening of schools in accordance with the time-frame outlined in the roadmap and all decisions on how schools are to safely re-open and operate will be consistent with 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. These will now be worked through in detail as part of the development of the roadmap for reopening schools.

The National Return to Work Safely Protocol has been published, and this 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. This work will also be informed by guidance and experience from other jurisdictions and from advice published by international bodies such as the World Health Organisation and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

184. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the additional funding resources schools will have in order to pay for the new public health and safety requirements they will have to implement. [7531/20]

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.

Question No. 185 answered with Question No. 179.

Special Educational Needs

Questions - Written Answers

186. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the July provision is going ahead in 2020; if not, if it will be facilitated in the homes of the children; the alternate plans he is developing for the July provision; when these plans will be made public; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7547/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is aware of concerns that the closure of schools has impacted hardest upon families who have children with complex needs whose wellbeing and engagement with learning depend very much on the routine of school and their relationships with other students, teachers and Special Needs Assistants.

They have also lost out on specialist supports during this closure period.

My Department has taken a number of initiatives to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

These include –

- Guidance issued to all schools to support the ongoing learning of children with special educational needs and children who are at risk of disadvantage;

- Guidance and resources developed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on supporting children with special educational needs

- €10m in ICT grant funding to schools towards the purchase of technology and devices to support students at risk of educational disadvantage.

- Continued funding of Home Tuition or, where this is not possible, flexibility to bank hours for use at a later time in the year

- Resources to support good mental health and wellbeing amongst students produced by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

- To help schools plan for the new academic year, schools have been informed that their SNA allocation is being frozen at this year's level and there is provision for additionality where this might be required. No school will therefore have a lower allocation for the next school year.

- The Middletown Centre for Autism has developed a range of online resources for children and young people with Autism and their parents on education provision in the Home.

Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 health crisis, it is not possible to deliver the normal July Provision programme in the same way and at the same time as in other years.

However my Department is planning for 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.

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.

Planning is underway and consultations with stakeholders have commenced. The willingness of schools, teachers and SNAs to participate are key to the provision of a summer educa-

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tion programme.

An announcement will be made as soon as possible.

Question No. 187 answered with Question No. 123.

Apprenticeship Programmes

188. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the programme in existence or being planned going forward for apprenticeships in Carlow town or county in view of the fact that Carlow is a manufacturing town. [7567/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan): Apprenticeships are demand driven educational and training programmes, which aim to develop the skills of an apprentice in order to meet the needs of industry and the labour market. As apprentices are employees, the demand for apprenticeship is primarily met by the employer base in any area. Each region in the country has a dedicated apprenticeship support system which is managed by the local Education and Training Board (ETB). In this particular situation it is managed by Kilkenny and Carlow ETB.

As national programmes, apprenticeships are delivered via a range of education and training providers and it is not practical to offer the full range of apprenticeship trades in each training location. This does not preclude employers from any specific region from participating in these apprenticeships.

In terms of the manufacturing sector, there are two main apprenticeships in Manufacturing Engineering and Manufacturing Technology available as well as apprenticeships in associated functions such as ICT, Sales, Accounting Technician and Logistics/Supply Chain. A further apprenticeship in Manufacturing Data Integration Engineer is currently in development.

The 55 national apprenticeship programmes currently available are open to all eligible employers who wish to train apprentices in their particular sector, subject to suitability to train being assessed and approved by SOLAS via the local ETB. Interested employers who wish to be approved to train apprentices in a particular occupation should contact their local ETB or fill out an expression of interest form online on the apprenticeship jobs portal which is available on the website www.apprenticeship.ie.

Covid-19 Pandemic

189. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the engagement held with the organisers of a competition (details supplied) in view of Covid-19 restrictions. [7579/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Department of Education and Skills can confirm that it has engaged with the organisers of the BT Young Scientist and Technologist Exhibition around the 2021 event. The organisers of the BT Young Scientist & Technology Exhibition have confirmed to the Department that they are currently monitoring timelines around schools re-opening across the country and the Government's roadmap for re-opening the country. These decisions will determine any changes that may need to be made in relation to the delivery of the BT Young Scientist & Technology Exhibition 2021.

We will continue to engage with them as new information and guidelines emerge. The or-

Questions - Written Answers

ganisers remain committed to the running of the competition. All decisions will be guided by the most up to date advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team.

Question No. 190 answered with Question No. 123.

Question No. 191 answered with Question No. 101.

Question No. 192 answered with Question No. 123.

Special Educational Needs

193. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his attention has been drawn to the need for special education summer tuition classes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7603/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is aware of concerns that the closure of schools has impacted hardest upon families who have children with complex needs whose wellbeing and engagement with learning depend very much on the routine of school and their relationships with other students, teachers and Special Needs Assistants.

They have also lost out on specialist supports during this closure period.

My Department has taken a number of initiatives to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

These include –

- Guidance issued to all schools to support the ongoing learning of children with special educational needs and children who are at risk of disadvantage;

- Guidance and resources developed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on supporting children with special educational needs

- €10m in ICT grant funding to schools towards the purchase of technology and devices to support students at risk of educational disadvantage.

- Continued funding of Home Tuition or, where this is not possible, flexibility to bank hours for use at a later time in the year

- Resources to support good mental health and wellbeing amongst students produced by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

- To help schools plan for the new academic year, schools have been informed that their SNA allocation is being frozen at this year's level and there is provision for additionality where this might be required. No school will therefore have a lower allocation for the next school year.

- The Middletown Centre for Autism has developed a range of online resources for children and young people with Autism and their parents on education provision in the Home.

Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 health crisis, it is not possible to deliver the normal July Provision programme in the same way and at the same time as in other years.

However my Department is planning for 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.

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.

Planning is underway and consultations with stakeholders have commenced. The willingness of schools, teachers and SNAs to participate are key to the provision of a summer education programme.

An announcement will be made as soon as possible.

Special Educational Needs

194. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if matters raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) will receive a response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7616/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is aware of concerns that the closure of schools has impacted hardest upon families who have children with complex needs whose wellbeing and engagement with learning depend very much on the routine of school and their relationships with other students, teachers and Special Needs Assistants.

They have also lost out on specialist supports during this closure period.

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Questions - Written Answers

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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.

Planning is underway and consultations with stakeholders have commenced. The willingness of schools, teachers and SNAs to participate are key to the provision of a summer education programme.

An announcement will be made as soon as possible.

Special Educational Needs

195. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the steps that will be taken to compel the schools in south County Dublin in particular Dublin 12 that have capacity for ASD classes but are not compliant. [7622/20]

196. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education and Skills further to Parliamentary Question No. 217 of 13 May 2020, the number of the 43 children needing ASD special class places and the 36 children needing special school places that live in the Dublin 12 area; and the number of schools in Dublin 12 that do not have special school classes and have the capacity to set up an ASD class. [7623/20]

197. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education and Skills further to Parliamentary Question No. 217 of 13 May 2020, if he has considered sanctioning a school (details supplied) as an ASD specific school after considering the report. [7624/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 195 to 197, inclusive, together.

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 place-

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ment 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.

Questions - Written Answers

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.

The information requested by the Deputy, on individual children is not provided by the NCSE to my Department

School Staff

198. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated full year cost of recruiting 50 additional school principal posts in primary and post-primary schools. [7630/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The salary of a Principal teacher is determined by the teacher's years of service, qualifications in the case of a teacher first recruited prior to 2011, the size of the school and the sector where appointed.

The teacher's basic salary scale at both Primary and Post Primary levels range from €35,088 to €64,302 for teachers appointed prior to 2011 and from €36,953 to €69,407 for teachers appointed post 2011.

The minimum qualification for a Primary teacher is a primary degree. The minimum quali-

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fication for a second level teacher is a primary degree and a Higher Diploma in Education or equivalent.

In the case of teachers first recruited prior to 2011 the value of the relevant qualification allowance must be added to the basic salary degree. In the case of a primary teacher for example the value of the honours degree allowance is €4,918. In the case of a post primary teacher, the honours degree allowance is €4,918 and the honours H Dip is €1,236.

An additional allowance is paid to all Principal teachers: the allowance at Primary level ranges from €9,310 to €29,776 and at Post Primary level ranges from €9,310 to €42,469.

Examples of the range of new principal teachers' salaries are:

1 Primary school Principal teacher on the first point of the Pre 2011 salary scale, honours degree allowance and on the minimum point of the Principal teacher's allowance is €49,316.

2 Primary school Principal teacher on the first point of the Pre 2011 salary scale, honours degree allowance and on the maximum point of the Principal teacher's allowance is €69,782.

3 Primary school Principal teacher on the first point of the Post 2011 salary scale and on the minimum point of the Principal teacher's allowance is €46,263.

4 Primary school Principal teacher on the first point of the Post 2011 salary scale and on the maximum point of the Principal teacher's allowance is €66,729.

5 Post Primary school Principal teacher on the first point of the Pre 2011 salary scale, honours degree and honours H Dip allowance and on the minimum point of the Principal teacher's allowance is €50,552.

6 Post Primary school Principal teacher on the first point of the Pre 2011 salary scale, honours degree and honours H Dip allowance and on the maximum point of the Principal teacher's allowance is €83,711.

7 Post Primary school Principal teacher on the first point of the Post 2011 salary scale on the minimum point of the Principal teacher's allowance is €46,263.

8 Post Primary school Principal teacher on the first point of the Post 2011 salary scale on the maximum point of the Principal teacher's allowance is €77,557.

In determining the cost of additional posts the cost of Employer PRSI must also be included.

Accordingly the approximate cost of recruiting an additional 50 principal teachers in primary and post-primary schools including Employer PRSI would range from €2.6m to €4.6m.

National Council for Special Education

199. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the additional resources and budget increase being considered for the NCSE to deal with the substantial increase in the needs of children that are being very negatively affected by school closures due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7639/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has been 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.

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Supports provided include those relating to general learning and difficulties for pupils with special educational needs, 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>

While additional provision has been made for online education over the school closure period, some other NCSE activities, such as school support, visits and the provision of professional development programmes for schools, have been required to be suspended.

The level of resources which will be required for the NCSE to provide supports for schools and for children with special educational needs, will be considered in the context of ongoing developments regarding educational provision over the over the period of the Covid 19 restrictions, and as part of the annual estimates process which consider budgetary requirements.

School Transport

200. Deputy Pat Buckley asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a bus service will be provided for a school (details supplied) in view of its growth in recent years and the resulting increased demand for such a service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7644/20]

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.

201. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will consider increasing the allocation for persons graduating from post-leaving certificate nursing preparation courses to above the current 150 place allocation in the uptake of nursing places in college courses in 2020 due to a decline in international students. [7663/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): We understand that this is a time of uncertainty for students hoping to progress to higher education 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.

Schools Building Projects Applications

202. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of an application by a school (details supplied); if it will be reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7670/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I can confirm that my Department is in receipt of an application for capital funding, for additional accommodation, including provision of a new sports hall, from the school referred to by the Deputy.

Under the National Development Plan (NDP), increased funding has been provided for the school sector capital investment programme. This funding allows for a continued focus on the provision of new permanent school places to keep pace with demographic demand and also provides for an additional focus on the refurbishment of existing school buildings to include the building and modernisation of PE facilities in post-primary schools.

Under the Ireland Project 2040, we will invest €8.4 billion (compared to €4.9 billion in the previous decade) in primary and post primary school buildings.

The immediate priority of my Department is providing 20,000 new and replacement school places each year, to ensure that every child has a school place. The government will focus in the medium term on the provision of PE facilities in post primary schools.

My Department is assessing elements of the application under the terms of the 'Additional School Accommodation' scheme (ASA) to determine if there is any deficit of teaching accommodation. Once this assessment has been completed, the school authority will be contacted directly with a decision.

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Special Educational Needs

203. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on the need for more ASD places in Ashbourne, County Meath; and his plans to introduce more ASD places in the town. [7685/20]

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.

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 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.

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 provide special class or school places. I know that 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 is aware of an identified need for special classes at both primary and post-primary levels in the area and adjoining areas referred to by the deputy. The NCSE is currently engaging with schools in this area with a view to accommodating students who require special class placements in those areas for September.

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>

Schools Health and Safety

204. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if consideration will be given to the supply and installation of antibacterial and anti-viral door handles in schools; and his plans to install air purification systems in schools. [7692/20]

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Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is aware of the products referred to by the Deputy. That schools can operate in a safe manner that is consistent with public health advice will underpin any consideration of the matter. This must be balanced against overall resource constraints and other competing demands in the education sector, whilst also ensuring that solutions will not place an undue burden of ongoing operation and maintenance requirements on schools.

School Staff

205. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason for removing a teaching post in a school (details supplied) due to the school being one pupil short of the criteria required to maintain the post; and if the decision will be reconsidered. [7695/20]

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 Department has received correspondence recently from the school and will be engaging directly with the school in relation to their concerns.

Question No. 206 answered with Question No. 122.

School Staff

207. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a school (details supplied) will be allowed retain a teacher in view of the fact it was only one pupil short to be eligible to keep the teacher; if the points raised in the appeals submitted by the school will be given consideration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7726/20]

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 Department has received correspondence recently from the school and will be engaging directly with the school in relation to their concerns.

Special Educational Needs Staff

208. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when tutors of children with special needs will be allowed back to tutor children in their homes. [7731/20]

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,

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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.

State Examinations

209. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason an advisory group was not set up to consult with the stakeholders and develop a plan for all contingencies in relation to the leaving certificate 2020 before making the announcement that the exams would proceed. [7733/20]

210. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his officials were instructed to develop contingency plans in the event of the leaving certificate exams not proceeding; and if so, the reason the contingency plan was not shared with the stakeholders until 6 May 2020 and only discussed in detail on 7 May 2020. [7734/20]

212. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason he and his officials did not engage with the stakeholders earlier in planning for the document A Guide to Calculated Grades for Leaving Certificate students 2020 in view of the current date and the fact that schools are still awaiting advice, clarifications, CPD and a detailed document from his Department. [7736/20]

215. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason the stakeholders, parents, students, management bodies and teacher unions were not consulted on the design of the calculated grades system and on possible alternatives. [7739/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 209, 210, 212 and 215 together.

Consultation with all of those involved – students, teachers, school managers and others – has been central to my decision making about Leaving Certificate 2020. As part of planning for

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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.

The Advisory Group met for the first time in mid-April and has held a series of meetings to date and will continue to meet. Meeting documentation and agreed minutes of meetings are published on my Department's website.

The detailed guidance to teachers and principals on the implementation of calculated grades that was published on 21 May was developed by my Department in conjunction with the members of the Advisory Group, school management bodies and teacher unions.

Question No. 211 answered with Question No. 123.

Question No. 212 answered with Question No. 209.

Question No. 213 answered with Question No. 120.

Question No. 214 answered with Question No. 125.

Question No. 215 answered with Question No. 209.

Question No. 216 answered with Question No. 114.

Question No. 217 answered with Question No. 123.

Question No. 218 answered with Question No. 120.

Questions Nos. 219 and 220 answered with Question No. 182.

Special Educational Needs

221. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if there has been progress in relation to delivering an ASD-specific unit or school for the Dublin 12 area capable of addressing the shortfall in the places available to parents who are trying to find local schools with places for their children with special educational needs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7750/20]

223. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his Department has received a communication from the City of Dublin ETB in relation to having an interest in running an ASD-specific school in the Dublin 12 area; and if so, his views on such a proposal. [7752/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 221 and 223 together.

The provision of education for children with special needs is an ongoing priority for Gov-

ernment.

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.

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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 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.

No communication referred to by the Deputy has been received by my Department.

Schools Facilities

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222. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his Department or the NCSC have had contact with the owners of a school (details supplied) in relation to its future educational use; and if his Department has considered purchasing, asking for it to be donated to the State or leasing it. [7751/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I wish to confirm to the Deputy that 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.

My Department has not received correspondence from the property owner in this regard.

Question No. 223 answered with Question No. 221.

Schools Building Projects

224. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when work will start on a school (details supplied); the construction timeline; if he is satisfied that the school will be completed and ready for opening in September 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7754/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The permanent project for the school referred to by the Deputy is being delivered under my Department’s Design & Build Programme.

It is anticipated that the project will proceed to tender later this year.

My Department has informed the school and its patron body that it will be working to have the first phase of the school’s permanent accommodation handed over for occupation as early as possible in the 2021/22 school year.

School Accommodation

225. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when he will announce a permanent location for the new secondary school for the Blanchardstown village and the Blanchardstown west planning area; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the delay in providing clarity on the permanent location is causing difficulties for enrolment in view of the fact parents are unsure as to the location it will be finally based; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7755/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): As the Deputy is aware, included in the Government announcement in April 2018 for plans to the establish 42 new schools over the four years from 2019 to 2022 was a new post-primary school to be established in 2020 to serve the Blanchardstown_West_D15 and BlanchardstownVge_D15 school planning areas as a regional solution.

The patronage process for this new school is complete and patronage was awarded to Dub-

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lin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board (DDLETB) in December 2019.

In line with the policy on the use of State assets (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform Circulars 11/15 and 17/16) the Department are seeking to maximize the use of sites already in its ownership and of available properties in the ownership of other State bodies, where these are considered suitable.

Identified site options are currently being considered including potential campus solutions on existing post-primary school sites. The suitability of these site options are currently being technically assessed by our Professional & Technical staff. It is expected that this process will be complete in the coming weeks.

Unfortunately, due to certain sensitivities I am not in a position to indicate their location at this time, however, the proposed location for the school will be made known as soon as it is possible to do so.

Teaching Council of Ireland

226. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the Teaching Council is operating during the Covid-19 crisis; if it is accepting registration and re-registration applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7756/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Teaching Council has informed me that due to the current Covid-19 emergency, its offices are closed to the public and its staff are working remotely. During the initial stages of the lockdown new applications for registrations were suspended as they could not be processed remotely. I am advised that with effect from the 5th of May, on a limited basis and in keeping with public health guidelines, a small number of staff are attending the office to carry out essential work which cannot be done remotely including processing applications for registration. Given the nature of the current crisis and limited access to the workplace, delays in processing applications should be expected.

Applicants for registration are asked to ensure that all forms and supporting documentation submitted are correct and fully completed in advance of submission. Missing documentation will require further follow-up with the applicant which can lead to delays in registration.

The Teaching Council also advises that the majority of registration renewals are done online and that renewals received by post are also being processed. Similar delays may be experienced for renewals, where not conducted through the online system, due to public health guidelines and limitations on staff accessing the office to process post.

School Transport

227. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his plans to ensure adequate special needs school transport supports are put in place without further delay for a person (details supplied). [7763/20]

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

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post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

The purpose of the School Transport Scheme for children with Special Educational Needs is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children with special educational needs. Children are eligible for transport where they have special educational needs arising from a diagnosed disability in accordance with the Department's criteria and are attending the nearest recognised mainstream school, special class/special school or a unit, that is or can be resourced to meet their special educational needs. Eligibility is determined following consultation with the National Council for Special Education through its network of Special Education Needs Organisers.

The School Transport Section of my Department is currently liaising with the parent in regard to her application for transport for her son.

Schools Building Projects

228. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the progress on a school building project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7765/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Major Building Project for the school referred to by the deputy is included in my Department's Construction Programme which is being delivered under the National Development Plan. The project in question is at Stage 1 of architectural planning which entails preliminary design of site and location suitability and initial sketch scheme.

A review in 2019 of the demand for post primary provision in the area resulted in an increase in the schedule of accommodation to cater for up to 1,300 pupils. The Department met with the school and the increase was accepted by the school. Agreement was also obtained from the school patron on a reservation of space on the school site for future educational development.

Initially, it had been anticipated that this project would be delivered in the form of an extension and refurbishment. However, through ongoing engagement with the school, its Board of Management and Trustees (CEIST), the option of a New Build is currently being explored by the Department.

The Design Team has been instructed to provide an initial sketch scheme for a 1300 pupil school, and submit to the Department for review.

Following this review my Department will then be in contact with the Board of Management of the school with regard to the progression of the project.

State Examinations Commission

229. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the ten persons who are normally employed at the State Examinations Commission in order to deal with examination papers. [7766/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The State Examinations Commission has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

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In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

Schools Building Projects

230. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the construction of a new school building for a school (details supplied); the stage the plans are at; when it is anticipated that construction will commence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7768/20]

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

Under this arrangement, I can confirm that the ETB has appointed a design team for the project to design the buildings, obtain the necessary statutory planning permissions, and move the project onward to construction in due course.

As the project has not yet commenced architectural planning, it is too early in the process to provide a timeline for completion of the works.

Student Accommodation

231. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will consider introducing a means-tested intervention to assist student accommodation providers that may not be able to reimburse students for the time they will not be using student accommodation due to Covid-19 restrictions which would allow students to end their tenancy early without financial penalty; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7771/20]

286. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the action he will take with operators of student accommodation to seek refunds for students who left the accommodation on the instruction of his Department on 12 March 2020. [8098/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 231 and 286 together.

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. While I would wish to see this principle applied in the case of students who were residing in privately owned student accommodation also, it is not within the remit of my Department to direct any accommodation provider to offer a refund.

Special Educational Needs Staff

232. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the redeployment of SNAs has now been scrapped; his plans to reassign them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7789/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Minister announced on

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1st April a contingency plan for all Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) to be available for a new temporary assignment scheme as part of the Government's response to Covid-19. In the normal course of events, the majority of children with disabilities access multidisciplinary therapy services through the HSE. Many of these services have been scaled down during the Covid-19 emergency situation as staff are redeployed. The reduction in these services, combined with school closures are putting substantial demands on children with disabilities and their families. It is intended that the temporary assignment of SNAs to support children's disability services during this public health emergency will help to alleviate the stress being experienced by these vulnerable families.

My Department's '*Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs*' document provides a framework for SEN Teachers and SNAs to maintain contact with SEN students and to provide appropriate learning support. It is acknowledged and welcomed that many SNAs have been engaged in such work through their schools since the closure period began. It has been confirmed to school management that, in the interim period pending the assignment of an individual SNA to the HSE, that SNA is available to support their allocated students through their school.

The HSE has now finalised the details of a new service which SNAs will provide during the school closure period. The HSE has started assigning SNAs to families and children identified in their services.

There has been close cooperation between the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Health and the HSE in establishing and managing the scheme to date. The Departments and the HSE hold weekly meetings with the Education Division of Fórsa (the trade union representing SNAs) to resolve any issues of concern.

SNAs will be asked to provide support to those students in receipt of HSE Disability services by way of remote working through the use of telephones, smart phones or laptops. They will work under the guidance and direction of the child's 'key point of contact' who will be a clinician such as a speech and language therapist, psychologist or occupational therapist who is familiar with the student and will explain what support each student and family might require. The key point of contact will provide strategies for working with the child / family and will signpost the SNA towards any resources required. Communication channels between the school and the SNA will be facilitated where appropriate to ensure that SNAs can receive guidance where educational issues arise during the course of the suite of supports being provided by the HSE teams during this period.

SNAs will be matched with students, and wherever possible this will be their own allocated student(s). If this is not possible, SNAs may then be matched to support children with whom they are not familiar. Students and families requiring the greatest level of support will be prioritised.

To ensure that SNAs receive appropriate support and have regular opportunities to engage with the HSE's multidisciplinary teams, SNAs will be able to access resources at the relevant HSE or disability service premises and will be provided with a letter identifying them as an essential worker to facilitate travel to these centres.

It is intended that the work of the SNAs will be underpinned by dedicated ICT supports. Therefore, where the SNA prefers to work remotely or has an underlying health condition or particular circumstances that impact on their ability to leave their home and has access to the appropriate technology this can be facilitated with the agreement of the Service Manager and key point of contact.

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The HSE will provide induction for all SNAs who are asked to participate in the new service. Where possible they will ask SNAs to attend one of their offices to do this but where SNAs are self-isolating, have underlying health conditions or have childcare or other caring responsibilities, the induction can be done remotely.

The HSE are providing a dedicated IT platform which will allow the HSE to match SNAs to children / families. This platform will also allow the SNA to log their interactions with the family and to report on same. SNAs can use their own phone, tablet or laptop to carry out this work, and access to appropriate resources and technology will also be available at the HSE / disability premises.

At all times the HSE will take account of the public health restrictions in place and the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business published by Government on 1 May.

Question No. 233 answered with Question No. 172.

School Staff

234. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the decision to redeploy a teacher (details supplied) in a school will be reviewed in view of the circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7860/20]

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 submitted an appeal to the Primary Staffing Appeals Board which has been deemed ineligible under the criteria set out in Circular 18/2020. The school has been notified in this regard and the teacher referred to by the Deputy has been placed on the Main Redeployment Panel.

Question No. 235 answered with Question No. 121.

State Examinations

236. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the timeline for the processing of calculated grades, appeals and resits to allow for planning by students and teachers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7867/20]

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

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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

237. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if students that sit the HPAT in 2020 can use their grade for entry into college in 2021, thus avoiding the associated stress and cost; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7868/20]

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.

Students who choose to sit the 2020 Leaving Certificate exams when it is safe to do so and who receive an improved CAO offer on foot of these results will receive a deferred offer to start their course in the 2021/22 academic year. However such offers are part of the 2020 application cycle, and will use the results of the 2020 HPAT sitting.

Question No. 238 answered with Question No. 101.

Question No. 239 answered with Question No. 121.

Covid-19 Pandemic

240. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if special schools and special classes are being considered in the context of plans to reopen schools in September 2020. [7874/20]

245. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a specific plan is being developed to support the reopening of special schools and special classes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7879/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 240 and 245 together.

On 1st 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.

Question No. 241 answered with Question No. 130.

Covid-19 Pandemic

242. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the bodies consulted in a consultation carried out by his Department on the reopening of schools in September 2020. [7876/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is engaging and working with representatives of students, parents, teachers, school leadership and management bodies on planning arrangements for the re-opening of schools in accordance with the timeframe outlined in the roadmap.

Stakeholders include, Irish Second Level Students Union, National Parents Council –Primary, National Parents Council –Post Primary, National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools, Joint Managerial Body, Catholic Primary School Management Association, Church of Ireland Board of Education, National Association of Board of Management in Special Education, An Foras Pátrúnacha, Educate Together, Muslim Primary Education Board, Education and Training Boards Ireland, Irish National Teachers Organisation, Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland, Teachers Union Ireland, Irish Primary Principals Network, Down Syndrome Ireland, National Council for Special Education, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and the National Education Psychological Service . Engagements are also planned with other Government Departments as work proceeds on developing the roadmap and all decisions on how schools are to safely re-open and operate will be consistent with public health advice.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

243. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a reduction in

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class sizes is being considered to aid social distancing when schools reopen. [7877/20]

271. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the teacher-pupil ratio can be reduced to help schools deal with the Covid-19 health crisis, get pupils back to school and provide a long-term positive impact on the well-being of students and their educational attainment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7993/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 243 and 271 together.

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 include those referred to by the Deputies in their questions. 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.

Question No. 244 answered with Question No. 131.

Question No. 245 answered with Question No. 240.

Ombudsman for Children

246. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on inviting the Ombudsman for Children to participate in discussions regarding the safe reopening of schools on a phased basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7880/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I met the Ombudsman for Children on May 6th to discuss a range of issues concerning the provision of education following correspondence I received from him. I welcome his contribution on a number of issues which we discussed and as work progresses on developing a roadmap for schools to reopen in line with public health advice my Department will engage with the Ombudsman for Children’s Office further. My officials have been in contact with the Ombudsman for Children to make suitable arrangements for a follow up meeting.

Covid-19 Pandemic

247. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if additional supports are being considered to support DEIS schools in reopening; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7881/20]

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.

My 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. These issues 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. The Continuity of Learning group has been set up and will be providing guidance to schools to support schools on re-opening

On Wednesday 6 May 2020, I announced the early payment of the €16million DEIS grant for the 2020/21 school year. The funding is being 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 890 schools with more than 180,000 students in the DEIS programme. The grants, normally paid in June and September, are worth €12m to the 692 primary schools and €4m to the 198 post-primary schools.

My Department has also issued the €50m in ICT grants, including the additional fund of €10m which was announced recently.

Schools around the country are providing invaluable supports to young people in the most trying of circumstances. They will now be able to use this grant funding, if required, to support existing programmes to ensure continuity of learning, particularly for those most at risk. It is particularly important for students at risk of educational disadvantage to have regular, ongoing schooling.

In addition to the above, my Department has taken a number of measures to date to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

They include:

- Guidance being issued to all schools to support the ongoing learning of children with special educational needs and children who are at risk of disadvantage

- Collaboration with Cisco/WebEX to support schools with training in video conferencing software – for use by teachers with their classes

- Guidance and resources developed by the National Council for Special Education on supporting children with special educational needs

- Continuation of the School meals programme, funded through the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, to provide food parcels to children who are at risk of food poverty

- Continued funding of Home Tuition or, where this is not possible, flexibility to bank hours for use at a later time in the year

- Resources to support good mental health and wellbeing amongst students produced by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

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Question No. 248 answered with Question No. 132.

Student Accommodation

249. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will engage with third-level institutions to ensure that no student in student accommodation will be made homeless in the summer months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7883/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Higher Education Institutions are autonomous bodies which are entitled to regulate their own affairs and administrative processes, and it is not within my remit to become involved in the details of their accommodation provision.

In cases where a student wishes to extend their stay in their accommodation beyond the period agreed in their original license agreement, I would recommend that they make contact with their accommodation provider at the earliest possible opportunity to see if this can be facilitated. If this is not possible, under the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019 students have access to the Dispute Resolution Services of the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB). The relevant division of the RTB can be contacted at ssa@rtb.ie.

Student Accommodation

250. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will develop in conjunction with the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, specific guidance for providers of student specific accommodation to allow students to collect their belongings safely at the end of a lease; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7884/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department's expectation is that those responsible for providing student accommodation would make continued arrangements to keep the belongings of those who vacated their accommodation early due to Covid-19 safe and secure at this time and would ensure that students are enabled to continue to follow the public health advice.

I would advise students to contact their accommodation provider to discuss what the most appropriate arrangement is in their circumstance.

When arrangements are being made to collect belongings in due course accommodation providers and students should ensure that social distancing measures are followed.

School Curriculum

251. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the ongoing review of the senior cycle. [7885/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): In late 2016, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) commenced an extensive review of senior cycle programmes and vocational pathways, to include Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Established.

As part of the first phase of the review the NCCA conducted international research on senior

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cycle in a number of other jurisdictions (France, Sweden, New Zealand, Queensland, Finland, England, Netherlands, and Ontario).

Over the school year 2018/2019, a representative sample of 41 schools were directly involved in the initial consultation cycles of the review. The first of two consultation cycles focused on the purpose of senior cycle and futures thinking, with the second consultation cycle focusing on pathways and flexibility.

The NCCA then commenced a public consultation which invited individuals and organisations to provide feedback on the areas for development emerging from the review to date. This phase of consultation was informed by two NCCA documents, an Interim report of review of Senior Cycle Education and accompanying Senior Cycle Review Consultation Document. The phase of consultation concluded in November 2019.

Work on the Review of Senior Cycle has continued throughout 2020 and is nearing completion. The NCCA is completing an Advisory Report on the review setting out areas of work and plans to be pursued in the future development of senior cycle education.

The timing for the approval and publication of the Advisory Report is currently under review in light of the impact which the emergence of COVID-19 and the measures aimed at addressing the spread of the virus have had on schools and the education system more generally. Developments during this period have highlighted aspects of senior cycle education that may warrant further consideration and additional attention within the Advisory Report. Changes on the scale envisaged this year, which have come about as a result of the exceptional circumstances prevailing as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic, will be of particular interest to this work. However, it should be noted that the circumstances pertaining this year, and the arrangements in place for the provision of Calculated Grades to students, are exceptional and it is understood that they will not be regarded as a precedent or as agreement by teachers, principals or schools to carry out such tasks in future years.

In this overall context, it is currently envisaged that the report will be finalised by the NCCA no earlier than Q3, 2020.

The report will then be submitted to my Department for consideration.

Technological Universities

252. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status the development of each of the proposed technological universities. [7886/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): As autonomous, independent, higher education institutions it remains a matter for individual institutes of technology engaged in a consortium progressing proposals for technological university (TU) designation under the requirements of the Technological Universities Act 2018 to progress their proposals appropriately subject to their particular circumstances.

In this context yesterday, following the conclusion of the consultation and decision-making process prescribed by the 2018 Act, I notified the applicant institutes of Cork IT and IT Tralee of my final decision to grant their application as the MTU consortium for the making of an order under 36 of the 2018 Act to be established as a TU, subject to the prescribed Oireachtas approval process and with a view to the establishment of the new TU on 1 January 2021.

Three other TU development consortia continue to work towards the submission of applica-

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tions under the Act. The Department understands that the Connacht Ulster Alliance consortium of Letterkenny IT, IT Sligo and Galway Mayo IT, is planning, subject to meeting the eligibility criteria, to submit an application by the end of this year. The consortium comprising Athlone IT and Limerick IT has a submission date in view for their application of October 2020. The TUSEI consortium comprising IT Carlow and Waterford IT continues to develop its application and is in the process of establishing a fulltime project office and implementing key elements of a cross-institutional change management programme.

Technological Universities

253. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if his Department or the HEA have conducted a review of the operation of Dublin Technological University in the context of the development of further technological universities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7887/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): TU Dublin has been a key contributor to the TU Research Network (TURN) high level advisory group which submitted its report to the Department in Quarter 4 2019. The report entitled *Connectedness & Collaboration enabled by Connectivity* focuses on how emerging TUs can achieve their sectoral and national strategic objectives and the supports that are required to do so most effectively and efficiently. The TURN report sets out the case for a state change in higher education reform for the delivery of national strategic priorities such as are elaborated in Project Ireland 2040, the National Development Plan and Future Jobs Ireland through the connectedness, particularly at regional level, collaboration and connectivity of TUs and their unique delivery of programmes across the full range of the National Framework of Qualifications from apprenticeships to doctoral degrees. The report, which is available on the Department's website, makes a series of 12 recommendations that will provide a solid foundation for the development and progression of TUs in the state.

Beyond the TURN process, TU Dublin has also been of assistance in sharing its experiences upon request with other TU development consortia that are seeking to advance applications for TU designation under the TU Act 2018.

As part of the System Performance Framework 2018 – 2020 the Higher Education Authority has agreed mission-based performance compacts with higher education institutions aligned to the framework. The Authority has embarked upon the next round of strategy and performance dialogue with higher education institutions to monitor and review their performance against their compacts. All institutions, including TU Dublin, submitted a self-evaluation report of their progress towards interim targets in their compacts in Autumn 2019. The reports were reviewed by the Authority and an expert advisory panel, with feedback being provided to the institutions in early 2020. The Authority was due to meet with institutions subsequently to discuss the reports but has had to postpone the meetings for the time being as a result of the COVID19 pandemic.

In addition to the self-evaluation reports, institutions were also invited by the Higher Education Authority to submit impact assessment case studies in Autumn 2019, aligned with national priorities and targets as set out in performance compacts and with reference to the System Performance Framework 2018-2020 and evolving national policy objectives. Case studies were reviewed by an expert advisory panel, which informed the allocation of €5 million in performance funding. TU Dublin was awarded €350,000 in performance funding for its impact case study "*Establishment of Technological University Dublin*".

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Section 23 of the Technological Universities Act 2018 requires a technological university to submit to the Minister for Education and Skills and to the Higher Education Authority an annual report on its activities in the immediately preceding year not later than 30 June in each year, having regard to its strategic development plan and equality statement and any requirements imposed under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012. The Minister shall cause copies of the annual report to be laid before each House of the Oireachtas and the TU shall arrange for the report to be published on the internet.

During its first year since establishment, TU Dublin carried out an extensive consultation process with staff, students, external partners and stakeholders which contributed to the development of the university's first strategic development plan entitled *Realising Infinite Possibilities – Strategic Intent to 2030*. The plan was published on 30 January 2020 and both it and the university's equality statement are publicly available on TU Dublin's website.

Special Educational Needs

254. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the July provision will be extended to cover the month of June; if the provision will be extended as a once-off measure to all other children with a disability in view of the significant period of time they have been out of school due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7905/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is aware of concerns that the closure of schools has impacted hardest upon families who have children with complex needs whose wellbeing and engagement with learning depend very much on the routine of school and their relationships with other students, teachers and Special Needs Assistants.

They have also lost out on specialist supports during this closure period.

My Department has taken a number of initiatives to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

These include –

- Guidance issued to all schools to support the ongoing learning of children with special educational needs and children who are at risk of disadvantage;

- Guidance and resources developed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on supporting children with special educational needs

- €10m in ICT grant funding to schools towards the purchase of technology and devices to support students at risk of educational disadvantage.

- Continued funding of Home Tuition or, where this is not possible, flexibility to bank hours for use at a later time in the year

- Resources to support good mental health and wellbeing amongst students produced by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

- To help schools plan for the new academic year, schools have been informed that their SNA allocation is being frozen at this year's level and there is provision for additionality where this might be required. No school will therefore have a lower allocation for the next school year.

- The Middletown Centre for Autism has developed a range of online resources for children and young people with Autism and their parents on education provision in the Home.

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Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 health crisis, it is not possible to deliver the normal July Provision programme in the same way and at the same time as in other years.

However my Department is planning for 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.

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.

Planning is underway and consultations with stakeholders have commenced. The willingness of schools, teachers and SNAs to participate are key to the provision of a summer education programme.

An announcement will be made as soon as possible.

Schools Building Projects

255. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the steps he is taking to prioritise the completion of school construction projects in advance of September 2020 to assist with the Covid-19 social distancing rules; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7906/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The construction sector is re-opening on a gradual and phased basis since Monday 18th May. It will take time to remobilise and see impact of new working arrangements. It is therefore too early to speculate on how timelines of projects will be impacted as a result of COVID-19 working arrangements. My Department is engaging with School Patrons and relevant schools in relation to necessary school accommodation provision for the 2020/21 school year in light of any impact of COVID-19 on project delivery timescales and develop and implement contingency arrangements as required. Planning and preparatory work is well advanced in this regard.

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. My 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. 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.

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256. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the engagement

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he has had with school management at primary and post-primary level, respectively, to source additional accommodation to facilitate Covid-19 social distancing rules from September 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7907/20]

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. These will now be worked through in detail as part of the development of the roadmap for reopening schools. The Department is conscious of the need for early clarity on key issues in order to facilitate and support planning for schools re-opening in September.

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.

Student Support Schemes

257. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will provide for a financial support package to a cohort of persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7928/20]

258. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will provide a financial support scheme similar to that introduced by the Canadian Government to support students who cannot secure employment during the summer months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7930/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 257 and 258 together.

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.

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 the 11th June 2020 for renewal applicants and the 9th 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.

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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.

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 your local Tax Office or from the Revenue Commissioners website, www.revenue.ie.

School Enrolments

259. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of pupils necessary in a primary school in order for an English As An Additional Language educator to be employed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7936/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Special Education Teaching allocation, as outlined in Circular 0007/2019, provides a single unified allocation for special educational support teaching needs to each school, based on each school's educational profile and also encompasses the Language Support (EAL) allocation that schools were allocated in previous years.

Further temporary Language Support is also provided, as necessary, to schools that have high concentrations of pupils that require language (EAL) support. At primary level, these allocations are made on the basis of appeals by schools to the Primary Staffing Appeals Board.

The staffing arrangements for primary schools for the 2020/21 school year, as set out in Circular 0018/2020 which is available on the Department website, provides details on the staffing appeal process. Where at least 20% of the total enrolment of the school is made up of pupils that require EAL support (pupils with less than B1 Level 3 proficiency), the Board of Management may lodge an appeal for a review of the proposed allocation for pupils requiring EAL support.

Special Educational Needs

260. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of plans for the July provision to take place in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7937/20]

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Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is aware of concerns that the closure of schools has impacted hardest upon families who have children with complex needs whose wellbeing and engagement with learning depend very much on the routine of school and their relationships with other students, teachers and Special Needs Assistants.

They have also lost out on specialist supports during this closure period.

My Department has taken a number of initiatives to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

These include –

- Guidance issued to all schools to support the ongoing learning of children with special educational needs and children who are at risk of disadvantage;

- Guidance and resources developed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on supporting children with special educational needs

- €10m in ICT grant funding to schools towards the purchase of technology and devices to support students at risk of educational disadvantage.

- Continued funding of Home Tuition or, where this is not possible, flexibility to bank hours for use at a later time in the year

- Resources to support good mental health and wellbeing amongst students produced by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

- To help schools plan for the new academic year, schools have been informed that their SNA allocation is being frozen at this year's level and there is provision for additionality where this might be required. No school will therefore have a lower allocation for the next school year.

- The Middletown Centre for Autism has developed a range of online resources for children and young people with Autism and their parents on education provision in the Home.

Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 health crisis, it is not possible to deliver the normal July Provision programme in the same way and at the same time as in other years.

However my Department is planning for 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.

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.

Planning is underway and consultations with stakeholders have commenced. The willingness of schools, teachers and SNAs to participate are key to the provision of a summer education programme.

An announcement will be made as soon as possible.

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261. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will address a matter raised in correspondence in relation to a school (details supplied) in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7938/20]

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 has not submitted a staffing appeal to date. The Primary Staffing Appeals Board will next consider appeals in June. The closing date for the receipt of staffing appeals is 15th June.

School Guidelines on Mental Health

262. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if provisions are being made for children who are struggling with the lack of closure to finish out their schooling as per correspondence (details supplied). [7954/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I recognise that this is a particularly challenging time for all students, and parents across the education system, but particularly for those students who will be transferring from primary to post-primary school.

The Continuity of Schooling Group in the Department is developing further guidance for schools which will include advice on how best 6th class pupils can be supported to make the transition to post-primary school, given that they will not have the opportunity to engage in all of the traditional transition activities that they would normally have engaged in. Practical advice will be provided to both primary and post-primary schools to support the transition process and to ease the anxiety of the pupils involved.

School Guidelines on Mental Health

263. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position regarding the establishment of a mental health helpline for leaving certificate students; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7958/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): 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 the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) of my Department 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 developed by NEPS and 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 schools at this time.

Covid-19 Pandemic

264. **Deputy Darren O’Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the specific measures introduced to ensure continuity of learning for primary school children during the Covid-19 pandemic in view of the fact that teaching has moved from the classroom to online; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7965/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is taking a number of actions to ensure continuity of teaching and learning for primary school children due to the Covid 19 pandemic.

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A range of guidance has 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, to support the wellbeing of students and to support students at each of the key stages of transitions. Additional guidance is being developed for primary schools to support them further in the final weeks of the 2019/2020 school year, this will be published shortly.

All guidance for schools has been developed in consultation with relevant stakeholders – including teachers, parents and learners. There is also ongoing consultation with the management bodies and unions 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:

- a) the logistics of reopening; health and safety; hygiene; social distancing, etc., and
- b) 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 that 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.

Schools Building Projects

265. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the timeline for the completion of a school (details supplied); when he anticipates that both the primary school and a school will commence operating; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7983/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The school building project to which the Deputy refers is due to be handed over in Q2 2020 with the building ready for occupation by both schools for the school year 2020/2021

Schools Building Projects

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266. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the proposed extension at a school (details supplied); when he envisages the extension will be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7984/20]

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.

Special Educational Needs

267. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of children sanctioned for the July provision for the past five years by county in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7987/20]

268. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of teachers currently participating in the July provision model by county; if he will allow teachers participate in the July provision other than from their own school; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7988/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 267 and 268 together.

My Department is aware of concerns that the closure of schools has impacted hardest upon families who have children with complex needs whose wellbeing and engagement with learning depend very much on the routine of school and their relationships with other students, teachers and Special Needs Assistants.

They have also lost out on specialist supports during this closure period.

My Department has taken a number of initiatives to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

These include –

- Guidance issued to all schools to support the ongoing learning of children with special educational needs and children who are at risk of disadvantage;

- Guidance and resources developed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on supporting children with special educational needs

- €10m in ICT grant funding to schools towards the purchase of technology and devices to support students at risk of educational disadvantage.

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- Continued funding of Home Tuition or, where this is not possible, flexibility to bank hours for use at a later time in the year

- Resources to support good mental health and wellbeing amongst students produced by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

- To help schools plan for the new academic year, schools have been informed that their SNA allocation is being frozen at this year's level and there is provision for additionality where this might be required. No school will therefore have a lower allocation for the next school year.

- The Middletown Centre for Autism has developed a range of online resources for children and young people with Autism and their parents on education provision in the Home.

My Department's extended school year (ESY) scheme – also known as July provision – provides an extension of the school year for children with a severe or profound general learning disability or children with an Autism through either a school based or home based programme.

In 2019, 10, 563 children availed of July Provision with the delivery of the school and home based programmes involving approximately 5,000 Home Tutors, 640 school teachers and 1,454 SNAs. Details in relation to the number of children accessing the scheme from 2015-2019 are set in the attached table. A breakdown by county is not readily available.

[Table 1]

Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 health crisis, it is not possible to deliver the normal July Provision programme in the same way and at the same time as in other years.

However my Department is planning for 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.

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.

Planning is underway and consultations with stakeholders have commenced. The willingness of schools, teachers and SNAs to participate are key to the provision of a summer education programme.

An announcement will be made as soon as possible.

Special Educational Needs

269. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the July provision; if he will consider extending the July provision into August 2020 and include children beyond those who are currently eligible including children with Down's syndrome and other additional needs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7989/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is aware of

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concerns that the closure of schools has impacted hardest upon families who have children with complex needs whose wellbeing and engagement with learning depend very much on the routine of school and their relationships with other students, teachers and Special Needs Assistants.

They have also lost out on specialist supports during this closure period.

My Department has taken a number of initiatives to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

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- Guidance issued to all schools to support the ongoing learning of children with special educational needs and children who are at risk of disadvantage;

- Guidance and resources developed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on supporting children with special educational needs

- €10m in ICT grant funding to schools towards the purchase of technology and devices to support students at risk of educational disadvantage.

- Continued funding of Home Tuition or, where this is not possible, flexibility to bank hours for use at a later time in the year

- Resources to support good mental health and wellbeing amongst students produced by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

- To help schools plan for the new academic year, schools have been informed that their SNA allocation is being frozen at this year's level and there is provision for additionality where this might be required. No school will therefore have a lower allocation for the next school year.

- The Middletown Centre for Autism has developed a range of online resources for children and young people with Autism and their parents on education provision in the Home.

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However my Department is planning for 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.

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.

Planning is underway and consultations with stakeholders have commenced. The willingness of schools, teachers and SNAs to participate are key to the provision of a summer education programme.

An announcement will be made as soon as possible.

Schools Building Projects

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270. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the planned extensions for a school (details supplied) with regard to the temporary accommodation scheduled for opening in September 2020; if the project has been put out for tender; if fire safety and disabled access certificates have been applied for; and the status of the temporary and permanent structure plan in relation to the future extensions [7991/20]

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, this project has been devolved to the school authority for delivery. The school authority has advised that they have accommodation to cater for the start of the next academic year.

Question No. 271 answered with Question No. 243.

Special Educational Needs

272. **Deputy Hildegarde Naughton** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when he envisages the resumption of school based learning services for children and young adults with special needs. [8000/20]

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.

My 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 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.

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->

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

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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.

Emergency Works Scheme

273. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the options for funding available for a school (details supplied) that has a student starting at the school in September 2020 that is wheelchair bound and in relation to whom the purchase of specific equipment is required for the playground to enable them play with their peers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8001/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): If the student in question requires any works to enable access to the school or their classroom, an application for same can be considered under my Department's Emergency Works Scheme. Specialised furniture or equipment that is required to enable a pupil to undertake their studies is provided through the Furniture and Equipment Scheme, details of which are available on my Department's website.

The mechanism for applying for playground equipment is my Department's Summer Works Scheme. The school should apply for this when the scheme next opens for applications. In the meantime, I can advise the Deputy that the Minor Works Grant can be used to provide the equipment in question.

Student Grant Scheme

274. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the situation that applies to students that are not classed as independent for the purposes of the SUSI grant whose parents are 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 in SUSI. [8025/20]

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

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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.

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.

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

School Staff

275. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which a school (details supplied) can have its staffing allocation for 2020/2021 reviewed in line with the needs of its staff and pupils; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8027/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is responsible for determining the appropriate staffing levels in relation to the support of pupils with special educational needs in special schools, in accordance with the policies of my Department.

Enhanced pupil teacher and SNA ratios are provided to special schools to support them in dealing with pupils' educational and care needs.

Since 2012, special schools are staffed on the basis of individual pupil profile and the disability categorisations of those pupils, as opposed to being based primarily on school designation, in accordance with my Department's most recent Circular 0032/2019 - Appointment of Administrative Deputy Principal and Staffing in Special Schools.

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Arrangements in Special school staffing allocations are reviewed and updated each year by the NCSE and special schools are staffed on the basis of each year's current school enrolments.

The NCSE are engaging with the school on their staffing allocation for 2020-21, and this will be advised to the school shortly,

Question No. 276 answered with Question No. 120.

Question No. 277 answered with Question No. 118.

Special Educational Needs Staff

278. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position in relation to the planned redeployment of special needs assistants in the context of Covid-19; if there has been consultation with the relevant trade unions; if roles they may be requested to fill will be suitable for their skills and experience; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8051/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Minister announced on 1st April a contingency plan for all Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) to be available for a new temporary assignment scheme as part of the Government's response to Covid-19. In the normal course of events, the majority of children with disabilities access multidisciplinary therapy services through the HSE. Many of these services have been scaled down during the Covid-19 emergency situation as staff are redeployed. The reduction in these services, combined with school closures are putting substantial demands on children with disabilities and their families. It is intended that the temporary assignment of SNAs to support children's disability services during this public health emergency will help to alleviate the stress being experienced by these vulnerable families.

My Department's '*Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs*' document provides a framework for SEN Teachers and SNAs to maintain contact with SEN students and to provide appropriate learning support. It is acknowledged and welcomed that many SNAs have been engaged in such work through their schools since the closure period began. It has been confirmed to school management that, in the interim period pending the assignment of an individual SNA to the HSE, that SNA is available to support their allocated students through their school.

The HSE has now finalised the details of a new service which SNAs will provide during the school closure period. The HSE has started assigning SNAs to families and children identified in their services.

There has been close cooperation between the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Health and the HSE in establishing and managing the scheme to date. The Departments and the HSE hold weekly meetings with the Education Division of Fórsa (the trade union representing SNAs) to resolve any issues of concern.

SNAs will be asked to provide support to those students in receipt of HSE Disability services by way of remote working through the use of telephones, smart phones or laptops. They will work under the guidance and direction of the child's 'key point of contact' who will be a clinician such as a speech and language therapist, psychologist or occupational therapist who is familiar with the student and will explain what support each student and family might require. The key point of contact will provide strategies for working with the child / family and will signpost the SNA towards any resources required. Communication channels between the

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school and the SNA will be facilitated where appropriate to ensure that SNAs can receive guidance where educational issues arise during the course of the suite of supports being provided by the HSE teams during this period.

SNAs will be matched with students, and wherever possible this will be their own allocated student(s). If this is not possible, SNAs may then be matched to support children with whom they are not familiar. Students and families requiring the greatest level of support will be prioritised.

To ensure that SNAs receive appropriate support and have regular opportunities to engage with the HSE's multidisciplinary teams, SNAs will be able to access resources at the relevant HSE or disability service premises and will be provided with a letter identifying them as an essential worker to facilitate travel to these centres.

It is intended that the work of the SNAs will be underpinned by dedicated ICT supports. Therefore, where the SNA prefers to work remotely or has an underlying health condition or particular circumstances that impact on their ability to leave their home and has access to the appropriate technology this can be facilitated with the agreement of the Service Manager and key point of contact.

The HSE will provide induction for all SNAs who are asked to participate in the new service. Where possible they will ask SNAs to attend one of their offices to do this but where SNAs are self-isolating, have underlying health conditions or have childcare or other caring responsibilities, the induction can be done remotely.

The HSE are providing a dedicated IT platform which will allow the HSE to match SNAs to children / families. This platform will also allow the SNA to log their interactions with the family and to report on same. SNAs can use their own phone, tablet or laptop to carry out this work, and access to appropriate resources and technology will also be available at the HSE / disability premises.

At all times the HSE will take account of the public health restrictions in place and the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business published by Government on 1 May.

Question No. 279 answered with Question No. 139.

Covid-19 Pandemic

280. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he will respond to a matter raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) in the context of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8055/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): On 1st May, the Government published a roadmap to ease Covid-19 restrictions and reopen Ireland's economy and society.

It is outlined in the roadmap that from 18 May 2020, school buildings will be open for access by school staff for the organisation and distribution of remote learning.

My Department has published information for school staff which provides that schools can organise, prepare and disseminate books and other learning materials to students such as photocopies and written material in relation to tuition.

Parents should contact their school in this regard so that appropriate arrangements can be

made.

Special Education Review

281. **Deputy Martin Heydon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the report by the Special Education Review Committee which decides pupil staffing allocations for special schools; when this allocation model was last reviewed; when it will be updated in line with the reduction in the pupil teacher ratio in mainstream schools through recent years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8084/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is responsible for determining the appropriate staffing levels in relation to the support of pupils with special educational needs in special schools, in accordance with the policies of my Department.

Staffing arrangements for special schools are in line with policy advice provided by the NCSE in 2013, which did not recommend alteration to staffing ratios established under SERC Report in 1993.

Enhanced pupil teacher and SNA ratios are provided to special schools to support them in dealing with pupils' educational and care needs.

Since 2012, special schools are staffed on the basis of individual pupil profile and the disability categorisations of those pupils, as opposed to being based primarily on school designation, in accordance with my Department's most recent Circular 0032/2019 - Appointment of Administrative Deputy Principal and Staffing in Special Schools.

Arrangements in Special school staffing allocations are reviewed and updated each year by the NCSE and special schools are staffed on the basis of each year's current school enrolments.

The NCSE are currently undertaking policy advice on the educational provision that should be in place for students educated in special schools and special classes. This policy advice will make recommendations on the provision required to enable students in special schools and classes to achieve better outcomes.

The NCSE have been asked to complete and submit its report to the Minister not later than December 2020. There will be no change to the staffing arrangements currently in place in special schools, pending the receipt and consideration of this policy advice.

English Language Training Organisations

282. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the work being done to support English language students here; and if he has had discussions with the Minister for Justice and Equality regarding suspension of student visas until September 2020 or such point when face-to-face classes can be resumed. [8085/20]

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. While I have not had direct engagement with my colleague, the Minister for Justice and Equality, officials from our respective Departments are in regular contact on these matters.

My Department has established a Covid-19 Working Group for this sector which is com-

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prised of representatives of relevant Government Departments including the Department of Justice and Equality and representatives of both students and English language education providers. This Group continues to meet to address measures and supports for the students and providers in this sector.

The Department of Justice and Equality continues to publish updates on any changes to the immigration permission system resulting from the Covid-19 outbreak and has recently provided a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document to provide additional detail on these measures. The most recent update, issued on 13th May 2020, informs students that all immigration permissions that are due to expire from 20th May 2020 to 20th July 2020 will be automatically renewed for a period of 2 months. It is a requirement of these permissions that students continue to be enrolled in a course of study and that they attend scheduled classes including where they are provided online. In the current circumstances and as a temporary measure, students are also permitted to work for a maximum period of 40 hours a week on the condition that they complete their course online if this service is provided by their school. Further changes to student immigration permissions will be discussed with the Department of Justice and Equality and will be informed by engagement with stakeholders for this sector, Covid-19 developments and the timeframe for the re-opening of the premises of English language education providers.

The timeframe and arrangements for the re-opening of the premises of providers and for the return to in class tuition for students 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 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.

Special Educational Needs

283. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if clarity will be provided in relation to the July provision due to the urgent need being experienced by children with disabilities due to the closing of schools and related supports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8087/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): My Department is aware of concerns that the closure of schools has impacted hardest upon families who have children with complex needs whose wellbeing and engagement with learning depend very much on the routine of school and their relationships with other students, teachers and Special Needs Assistants.

They have also lost out on specialist supports during this closure period.

My Department has taken a number of initiatives to support children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage during the period of school closures.

These include –

- Guidance issued to all schools to support the ongoing learning of children with special

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educational needs and children who are at risk of disadvantage;

- Guidance and resources developed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on supporting children with special educational needs

- €10m in ICT grant funding to schools towards the purchase of technology and devices to support students at risk of educational disadvantage.

- Continued funding of Home Tuition or, where this is not possible, flexibility to bank hours for use at a later time in the year

- Resources to support good mental health and wellbeing amongst students produced by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

- To help schools plan for the new academic year, schools have been informed that their SNA allocation is being frozen at this year's level and there is provision for additionality where this might be required. No school will therefore have a lower allocation for the next school year.

- The Middletown Centre for Autism has developed a range of online resources for children and young people with Autism and their parents on education provision in the Home.

Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 health crisis, it is not possible to deliver the normal July Provision programme in the same way and at the same time as in other years.

However my Department is planning for 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.

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.

Planning is underway and consultations with stakeholders have commenced. The willingness of schools, teachers and SNAs to participate are key to the provision of a summer education programme.

An announcement will be made as soon as possible.

Special Educational Needs Staff

284. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if he has considered the use of SNA staff to provide the July provision in view of the willingness of many SNAs to provide this support and the high levels of training and experience many SNAs have with children with disabilities in particular; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8088/20]

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.

Questions - Written Answers

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.

The July Provision scheme is an extension of the school year. Where the scheme is held in school, special classes continue on and SNAs remain in the class to support the children availing of July Provision.

Special Educational Needs Staff

285. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if clarity will be provided on the proposed redeployment of SNAs to provide remote support to children with disabilities; if this is happening in counties Westmeath and Longford; the number of SNAs that have signed up for the scheme; if the scheme is mandatory or opt in; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8089/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): The Minister announced on 1st April a contingency plan for all Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) to be available for a new temporary assignment scheme as part of the Government's response to Covid-19. In the normal course of events, the majority of children with disabilities access multidisciplinary therapy services through the HSE. Many of these services have been scaled down during the Covid-19 emergency situation as staff are redeployed. The reduction in these services, combined with school closures are putting substantial demands on children with disabilities and their families. It is intended that the temporary assignment of SNAs to support children's disability services during this public health emergency will help to alleviate the stress being experienced by these vulnerable families.

My Department's '*Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs*' document provides a framework for SEN Teachers and SNAs to maintain contact with SEN students and to provide appropriate learning support. It is acknowledged and welcomed that many SNAs have been engaged in such work through their schools since the closure period began. It has been confirmed to school management that, in the interim period pending the assignment of an individual SNA to the HSE, that SNA is available to support their allocated students through their school.

The HSE has now finalised the details of a new service which SNAs will provide during the school closure period. The HSE has started assigning SNAs to families and children identified in their services.

There has been close cooperation between the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Health and the HSE in establishing and managing the scheme to date. The Departments and the HSE hold weekly meetings with the Education Division of Fórsa (the trade union representing SNAs) to resolve any issues of concern.

SNAs will be asked to provide support to those students in receipt of HSE Disability services by way of remote working through the use of telephones, smart phones or laptops. They will work under the guidance and direction of the child's 'key point of contact' who will be a clinician such as a speech and language therapist, psychologist or occupational therapist who is familiar with the student and will explain what support each student and family might re-

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quire. The key point of contact will provide strategies for working with the child / family and will signpost the SNA towards any resources required. Communication channels between the school and the SNA will be facilitated where appropriate to ensure that SNAs can receive guidance where educational issues arise during the course of the suite of supports being provided by the HSE teams during this period.

SNAs will be matched with students, and wherever possible this will be their own allocated student(s). If this is not possible, SNAs may then be matched to support children with whom they are not familiar. Students and families requiring the greatest level of support will be prioritised.

To ensure that SNAs receive appropriate support and have regular opportunities to engage with the HSE's multidisciplinary teams, SNAs will be able to access resources at the relevant HSE or disability service premises and will be provided with a letter identifying them as an essential worker to facilitate travel to these centres.

It is intended that the work of the SNAs will be underpinned by dedicated ICT supports. Therefore, where the SNA prefers to work remotely or has an underlying health condition or particular circumstances that impact on their ability to leave their home and has access to the appropriate technology this can be facilitated with the agreement of the Service Manager and key point of contact.

The HSE will provide induction for all SNAs who are asked to participate in the new service. Where possible they will ask SNAs to attend one of their offices to do this but where SNAs are self-isolating, have underlying health conditions or have childcare or other caring responsibilities, the induction can be done remotely.

The HSE are providing a dedicated IT platform which will allow the HSE to match SNAs to children / families. This platform will also allow the SNA to log their interactions with the family and to report on same. SNAs can use their own phone, tablet or laptop to carry out this work, and access to appropriate resources and technology will also be available at the HSE / disability premises.

At all times the HSE will take account of the public health restrictions in place and the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business published by Government on 1 May.

Question No. 286 answered with Question No. 231.

Covid-19 Pandemic

287. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated timeframe for the reopening of primary schools nationwide; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8112/20]

288. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated timeframe for the reopening of post-primary schools nationwide; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8113/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 287 and 288 together.

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.

My Department is engaging and working with the education partners and relevant stakeholders on planning arrangements for the re-opening of schools in accordance with the time-frame outlined in the roadmap and all decisions on how schools are to safely re-open and operate will be consistent with 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. These will now be worked through in detail as part of the development of the roadmap for reopening schools. This work will also be informed by guidance and experience from other jurisdictions.

Post-Leaving Certificate Courses

289. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the steps being taken to ensure 2020 post-leaving certificate courses are completed and-or accredited; and the way in which he will ensure that students coming from post-leaving certificate courses will be in a position to attend higher education or further courses on the strength of their course. [8120/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy John Halligan): 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. ETB learners are being facilitated to undertake assessments for the purpose of progression to higher education in the required timeframe.

School Transport

290. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of private bus operators currently providing school bus services in counties Longford and Westmeath respectively, in tabular form; and the names of the schools serviced by these. [8150/20]

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 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.

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With regard to the question raised by the Deputy, Bus Éireann has confirmed that the number of private bus operators currently providing school bus services on the School Transport Scheme in counties Longford and Westmeath are as follows:

County of School	Number of Contractors
Longford	20
Westmeath	41

Details regarding the names of schools serviced by these contractors is currently being collated by Bus Éireann and once received, will be forwarded to the Deputy directly.

Question No. 291 answered with Question No. 101.

State Examinations

292. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the entire appeals process that will be available to leaving certificate students that are unsatisfied with their calculated grades in 2020. [8167/20]

294. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on putting in place an arbitration and mediation process for appeals on matters relating to the 2020 leaving certificate arrangements as the means of both addressing the issues involved and lessening the amount of potential court cases. [8207/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): I propose to take Questions Nos. 292 and 294 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

Question No. 293 answered with Question No. 125.

Question No. 294 answered with Question No. 292.

Cycle to Work Scheme

295. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the cycle to work scheme of his Department will be immediately reinstated. [8208/20]

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.

Question No. 296 answered with Question No. 123.

Third Level Education

297. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the steps he is taking to ensure higher and further education institutions are facilitating students of courses with practical elements to receive alternative forms of course work or credit to enable them to acquire their qualification or progress to the next stage. [8210/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): Following 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 in the further and higher education sectors to address issues relating to the maintenance of the quality and standards of qualifications. This group has focused on the implementation of a range of alternative arrangements, where appropriate and necessary, in order to meet these standards. Such alternative arrangements are being applied at an institutional level for teaching and learning, assessments and for practical course elements.

These arrangements have been developed to ensure that qualifications achieved by students during this period will be valued and regarded exactly as in any other year.

Providers have been communicating directly with their students to inform them of the measures that are being implemented for their particular courses to enable them to acquire their qualification or progress to the next stage. Students should contact their provider if they have any queries, including in relation to the practical elements of their courses.

Covid-19 Pandemic

298. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which

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young children will be expected to socially distance from one another if schools resume in September 2020; and if consideration has been given to the well-being and practicalities of same for young children. [8217/20]

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

My Department is engaging and working with the education partners and relevant stakeholders on planning arrangements for the re-opening of schools in accordance with the time-frame outlined in the roadmap and all decisions on how schools are to safely re-open and operate will be consistent with public health advice

The wellbeing of our school communities will be a fundamental element of any plan to ensure a successful return to school. I recognise the need to support the wellbeing of our students and school staff in order to support successful re-engagement with teaching and learning.

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 include 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. This work will also be informed by guidance and experience from other jurisdictions.

Home Schooling

299. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if provisions are being made to continue home schooling platforms from September 2020 onwards for parents who wish for their children to remain at home to continue their education until such time as parents are of the view it is safe for their children to return to school. [8218/20]

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

My Department is engaging and working with the education partners and relevant stakeholders on planning arrangements for the re-opening of schools in accordance with the time-frame outlined in the roadmap and all decisions on how schools are to safely re-open and operate will be consistent with 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 include 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. This work will also be informed by guidance and experience from other jurisdictions.

Student Grant Scheme

Questions - Written Answers

300. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if grant thresholds are being extended; and if the registration fee has been considered for abolition (details supplied). [8220/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Joe McHugh): 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 the 11th June 2020 for renewal applicants and the 9th 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.

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).

Under my Department's free fees schemes, the Exchequer provides funding toward the tuition fee costs of eligible students with students paying the student contribution which stands at €3,000 since 2014/2015. It is important to recognise that the exchequer pays this contribution (or part of it) on behalf of almost 50% of eligible undergraduate students as part of the student support grant.

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.

The Student contribution position will also form part of the comprehensive economic review 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. 301 answered with Question No. 109.

Question No. 302 answered with Question No. 123.

Maternity Leave

303. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his plans to extend paid maternity leave as a result of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7083/20]

304. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if consideration will be given to a temporary extension of maternity leave and maternity benefit in view of the Covid-19 pandemic (details supplied). [7084/20]

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305. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he has considered extending maternity leave in cases in which the woman has no access to a childminder or spouse at home to mind the child in view of the fact that women on maternity leave have little access to childminding pending the phased opening of the economy; and the way in which the issue can be resolved for women due back from maternity leave that have a childminder or a spouse at home and are finding it impossible in view of the fact the employer cannot put them on the workplace payment nor can they access the pandemic unemployment payment. [7098/20]

306. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he will consider extending maternity leave if the crèches and childcare facilities do not have the capacity to take on young children due to Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7145/20]

307. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his plans in place to extend maternity leave and maternity leave benefit in view of Covid-19 and the restrictions this has put on mothers; if consultations have taken place over the impact Covid-19 restrictions have had on mothers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7391/20]

309. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his plans to extend maternity benefit and maternity leave on a temporary basis in view of the difficulties experienced by new mothers in sourcing childcare and returning to work during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7517/20]

310. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his plans to extend maternity leave for new mothers that have been impacted by Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7688/20]

311. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if maternity leave and the maternity benefit will be temporarily extended in view of the interruption to patient and new baby support groups caused by the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7810/20]

314. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if due consideration will be given to extending the period of maternity leave for new mothers who have given birth since the Covid-19 restrictions were introduced. [8154/20]

315. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his plans to extend maternity leave in view of the fact that childcare facilities are closed due to Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8183/20]

316. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if maternity leave will be extended for an additional three months for all current recipients to enable them avail of the benefits of support groups and access to family members. [8201/20]

332. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if there is flexibility by which maternity leave payments can be extended due to exceptional circumstances during the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7202/20]

357. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if consideration will be given to extend paid maternity leave and benefit due to the Covid-19 crisis. [7863/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 303 to 307, inclusive, 309 to 311, inclusive, 314 to 316, inclusive, 332 and 357 together.

Questions - Written Answers

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.

Commercial Property

308. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if the same protection for commercial tenants as for residential tenants in the context of recent evictions by landlords of businesses will be introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7489/20]

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.

Questions Nos. 309 to 311, inclusive, answered with Question No. 303.

Liquor Licences

312. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his views on provisions for distilleries that do not have a licence to sell directly to the public to be able to make online sales and keep their business afloat during the Covid-19 pandemic and to support a necessary change in excise regulations to achieve this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7812/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The position is that excise licences issued by the Revenue Commissioners for the manufacture of intoxicating liquor, including a distiller of spirits licence under the Finance (1909-1910) Act 1910, do not permit retail sales to the public. However, the Intoxicating Liquor (Breweries and Distilleries) Act 2018 contains statutory provisions which allow craft breweries and distilleries to obtain a producer's

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retail licence from the Revenue Commissioners which enables them to sell intoxicating liquor manufactured on the premises to persons visiting the premises subject to specified conditions.

Section 1(6) of the Act provides that a licence issued or renewed under the Act shall operate to authorise the sale on the premises to which the licence is attached of intoxicating liquor manufactured on the premises:

(a) between the hours of 10.00 a.m. and 7.00 p.m. each day (other than Christmas Day) for consumption on or off the premises, to persons who have completed a guided tour of the premises, where the licence has been issued on foot of a Circuit Court certificate,

(b) between the hours of 10.00 a.m. and 7.00 p.m. each day (other than Christmas Day) for consumption off the premises, to persons who have completed a guided tour of the premises, where the licence has been issued on foot of a District Court certificate, or

(c) between the hours of—

(i) 10.00 a.m. and 7.00 p.m. each day (other than Christmas Day) or a day to which subparagraph (ii) applies, and

(ii) 12.30 p.m. and 7.00 p.m. on a Sunday, other than a Christmas Day which falls on a Sunday, and St. Patrick's Day, for consumption off the premises, to persons who have not completed a guided tour of the premises, irrespective of whether the licence has been issued on foot of a Circuit Court or a District Court certificate.

It can be seen, therefore, that off-sales to persons who have not completed a guided tour of the premises are permitted subject to conditions under the 2018 Act, in particular the continued availability of facilities for guided tours of the premises.

This information may be of some assistance to craft brewers and distilleries throughout the country who, like many enterprises, are finding it difficult to keep their businesses going during this public health emergency.

Legislative Measures

313. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he will provide an overview of the exact change needed in personal insolvency legislation due to Covid-19. [8076/20]

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, to Deputy Michael McGrath, 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, and most recently, parliamentary question, no. 486, on this issue, again from Deputy Michael McGrath on 20 May 2020. I provided detailed answers regarding the changes which are under consideration, arising from the statutory review.

Questions - Written Answers

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 nor have they been approved by Government.

Questions Nos. 314 to 316, inclusive, answered with Question No. 303.

Tax Reliefs Application

317. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if a commercial rent relief scheme will be initiated such as has been introduced in the UK, France, Australia, Denmark and Canada (details supplied). [8227/20]

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.

Court Procedures

318. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his views on enabling affidavits to be completed remotely to facilitate the Courts services operating as long as Covid-19 social distancing restrictions remain in place. [7055/20]

333. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if his attention has been drawn to concerns among legal practitioners regarding the taking of affidavits; if affidavits must be taken in person in view of the fact this presents real difficulties during the current Covid-19 pandemic; his plans to relax the requirement for person to person contact in the taking of affidavits; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7260/20]

373. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his plans to expedite the introduction of the part of the Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2017 that relates to statements of truth, as outlined under head 12 of the general scheme of the Bill as published, in view of the urgency of facilitating continued business without compromising the health and safety of persons in view of the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the need for the possibility to make and take such statements remotely using modern technology; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8136/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 318, 333 and 373 together.

I am aware that concerns have been raised about the requirement for affidavits to be signed and witnessed in person in the context of the current Covid-19 public health emergency. I also appreciate that the current pandemic is an anxious and challenging time for many people and organisations.

The position is, however, that there are statutory provisions that refer to the taking of affida-

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vits, including section 5 of the Commissioners for Oaths Act 1889 and section 72 of the Solicitors (Amendment) Act 1994. Furthermore, rules and procedures for the taking of affidavits are set out in Order 40 Rule 5 of the Superior Courts Rules, Order 25 Rule 1 of the Circuit Court Rules and Order 50 Rule 2 of the District Court Rules. Legislative changes would be required before changes in those procedures and rules could be brought about and only following careful consideration.

The Government approved drafting of the Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2020 in January last. It contains proposals to amend a number of courts-related Acts, including proposals for electronic submission and lodgement of documents and for a statement of truth mechanism. The Bill is being drafted at present. In addition, my Department is currently examining statutory reforms in order to respond to the new challenges and address various issues connected to the legal process arising in the context of the current Covid-19 pandemic.

It remains the case, however, that providers of legal services, like many businesses and organisations throughout the country that need to engage directly with the public must do so in compliance with public health guidelines. The Health and Safety Authority, the Health Service Executive (HSE), the Department of Health, and the Department of Business Enterprise and Innovation have published extensive information on working safely during the current health emergency. The Department of Business Enterprise and Innovation have also established a helpline to support and advise businesses in adapting to the current challenges.

I appreciate that these are difficult times for everyone and I would like to acknowledge the commitment, flexibility and innovation demonstrated by all involved in safely delivering continuity of access to justice during the current public health emergency.

Visa Applications

319. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his views on extending the temporary extension of immigration permissions from 20 May to 20 August 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7056/20]

330. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the impact on applicants that need or seek a new or renewed visa application after 20 May 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7197/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 319 and 330 together.

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

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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.

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 document on the COVID-19 impact on immigration and international protection can also be found on the website. This document is regularly updated.

Immigration Status

320. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if those currently on extended working holiday authorisation can have their visas extended until the phasing process has been completed; and if they can apply for another temporary work permit in view of Covid-19. [7069/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): On 13 May 2020, I announced that immigration permissions which expire between 20 May 2020 and 20 July 2020 are automatically renewed for a period of two months. The renewal of permission is on the same basis as the existing permission and the same conditions attach. Working Holiday Authorisations are included in this notice. This extension also applies to those whose permissions have already been extended by the previous notice issued on 20 March 2020.

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If normal business has not resumed by the end of that period, a further extension of permission may have to be facilitated. The Immigration Service website will be updated as necessary to reflect the latest positions - <http://www.inis.gov.ie/>

I should inform the Deputy that Working Holiday Authorisations, work permits and registration of these categories of permission involve three different Departments:

- The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) who is responsible for the Working Holiday Authorisation (WHA) Scheme, including its administration;

- The Department of Business Enterprise and Innovations (DBEI) with responsibility for the Work Permits Scheme; and

- Immigration Service Delivery (ISD) who are responsible for registrations issued under the above WHA and Work Permits scheme.

It is a condition of the WHA scheme that a successful applicant does not seek to settle in Ireland and will leave after the authorisation period expires. Once outside the State, there is nothing to prevent the person concerned from returning and presenting himself/herself to the Immigration Officer at the port of entry in order to seek permission for the purposes of re-entering the State for a specified period.

Entry into the State is solely at the discretion of the Immigration Officer at the port of entry. The onus is on the person concerned to have all documentation relating to his/her reasons for entering Ireland for presentation to the Immigration Officer to gain entry, i.e. work, study or tourism. The Immigration Officer may grant leave to enter to a maximum period of three months. They may, depending on the documentation presented grant a lesser period than three months. If it is the case that the person concerned wishes to return to the State in a working capacity, it is necessary for a prospective employer to obtain a work permit from DBEI on their behalf prior to taking up employment.

Any queries about changes sought to the WHA scheme, including the issue of transitioning from that scheme to the Work Permit scheme, should be directed to DFAT. The Immigration Service Delivery function of my Department will be guided by DFAT in relation to any changes it wishes to make to its scheme.

Visa Applications

321. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if advice can be provided to a person (details supplied) who urgently requires a visa renewal appointment due to extenuating circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7080/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): As the Deputy will appreciate, due to current Government restrictions aimed at slowing the spread of COVID-19 and to ensure customer safety, the Registration Office at Burgh Quay and all local Registration offices are currently closed. The reopening of the offices will be kept under review as the situation develops. Unfortunately, it is not possible to obtain an appointment to renew a registration at this time.

On 13 May, I announced that current valid permissions due to expire between 20 May 2020 and 20 July 2020 are automatically for a period of two months. The renewal of permission is on the same basis as the existing permission and the same conditions attach.

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I can inform the Deputy that the permission of the person referred to is due to expire within this time period and therefore has been automatically renewed by the notice for a further two months. The published notice of automatic renewal and the expired IRP card can be relied upon to confirm the permission to remain in the State.

Further updates will be provided on the Immigration Service website when available, and I would encourage the Deputy to view our updates and a detailed Frequently Asked Questions document on the Immigration Service website at:

<http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/COVID-19-updates-and-announcements>

Licence Applications

322. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if clubs seeking fundraising efforts online will be allowed to do so by local superintendents in the absence of District Court sittings. [7103/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): The Gaming and Lotteries Act 1956 provides for the regulation of gaming and lottery activity either under permit from An Garda Síochána or under licence from the District Court.

The occasions of gaming and lottery activities which require a permit from An Garda Síochána are set out in sections 6, 7 and 27.

Licences to operate lotteries are granted by the District Court. These lotteries are primarily used by our sports clubs and community organisations to raise funds.

I am not aware that issues have arisen with regard to applications for permits to An Garda Síochána.

The District Court, in the context of the restrictions required under the Covid19 situation, has reduced sittings. However, applicants for new or renewed lottery licences should contact their appropriate District Court Office to ascertain how such licences might be arranged.

The 1956 Act does not preclude the use of online means to promote the gaming or lottery, however, the activity would have to adhere to all requirements of the law.

Probation and Welfare Service

323. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the estimated full year cost of recruiting 20 additional full-time probation officers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7110/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): As the Deputy will appreciate, the Probation Service is responsible as lead in the assessment and management of offenders in our communities. It works to reduce offending, create safer communities and fewer victims through offender rehabilitation. It has a national remit with services delivered locally by staff based in 35 community based offices across the country.

I am informed that the salary scales applicable to the Probation Officer grade (post 1995 scale) run from €31,529 to €61,921 and with long service increments up to €66,118.

On the basis of the regular salary scale, I am informed by the Probation Service that the

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average cost of a Probation Officer salary, with Employers PRSI included, is estimated as approximately €52,000.

On that basis, I am informed that the estimated full year salary cost of recruiting 20 additional full-time Probation Officers would be approximately €1,040,000 annually.

Garda Resources

324. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if the resources and trained Garda personnel are in place for each of the divisional protection services units established to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7111/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): Under the Garda Síochána Act 2005 as amended, the Garda Commissioner has responsibility for management of An Garda Síochána and for the allocation and efficient use of Garda resources. This includes responsibility for the distribution of personnel across the various Garda Divisions. 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.

I have been informed by the Commissioner that 16 Divisional Protective Services Units (DPSUs) are now operational across 15 Divisions.

I am further informed that each DPSU is provided with dedicated office space for use in the provision of services that fall within its remit. Appropriate equipment, including IT equipment, has been provided for use within the DPSUs, along with one or more vehicles assigned for use by personnel attached to the relevant unit.

I understand that personnel assigned to DPSUs have been provided with a bespoke training course consisting of a number of modules addressing issues such as: investigation of sexual crime; child protection; investigation of domestic abuse; online child exploitation and sex offender management. This training course has been developed by the Garda National Protective Services Bureau (GNPSB), in conjunction with the Garda College.

I am assured that An Garda Síochána continues to implement the roll-out of DPSUs nationwide and aims to ensure that a DPSU will be in operation within every Garda Síochána division as soon as possible. Roll-out of these Units will meet a key commitment in *A Policing Service for the Future*, the four-year implementation plan giving effect to the recommendations of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland.

More broadly, the Deputy may be interested to know that addressing domestic abuse remains a key priority for An Garda Síochána and the justice sector as a whole at this time. In recognition of the added risk of domestic abuse at this time, my Department has led development of an inter-agency plan to address domestic abuse in the context of the Covid-19 crisis. This includes the provision of additional funding to frontline services, to ensure that supports and services remain available to victims and other measures to ensure that the civil and criminal justice system can continue to give priority to domestic abuse. An Garda Síochána continues to give priority to those who are at risk of domestic abuse, through a targeted operation “Operation Faoisimh”. And a public awareness campaign has also been launched, in partnership with the community and voluntary sector, to publicise the support which is still available. The campaign website www.stillhere.ie includes up to date information on domestic abuse and sexual violence, as well as information on the services and supports which are available to victims.

Garda Data

325. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of Garda public order unit vans attached to each Garda division outside Dublin as at 11 May 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7112/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): 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 understand that as part of the overall Garda fleet, a total of 29 vehicles categorised as public order vans are deployed nationally across all Garda regions. The following table, furnished to me by the Garda authorities, sets out the detail requested by the Deputy namely the public order vans attached to each Garda Division outside the Dublin Metropolitan Region as at 18 May 2020.

Division	Public Order Vans
Laois-Offaly Division	1
Waterford Division	1
Wicklow Division	1
Donegal Division	1
Galway Division	1
Louth Division	1
Clare Division	1
Cork City Division	2
Cork North Division	1
Limerick Division	1
Total (excluding DMR)	11

Finally, 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.

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 Equipment

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326. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the position regarding the issuing of body worn cameras to each front-line Garda; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7113/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland included a recommendation that An Garda Síochána develop a plan to deploy body worn cameras. The Implementation Plan for that report - *A Policing Service for the Future* - includes a related action in relation to legislative preparation for deployment of body worn cameras.

In June 2019, the Government approved the drafting of the general scheme of a Bill to allow for the introduction of body worn cameras by the Gardaí. My Department is working to progress a Bill to deal with that and related matters. It had been hoped to publish the general scheme of the Bill in 2019. However, progress has been slower than expected and it is now intended that the General Scheme will be ready for submission to Government by the end of June 2020. Approval of the General Scheme for publication will be a matter for the incoming Government. Subject to that approval and drafting, it is hoped that it will be possible to publish the Bill later in 2020. The intended timeline for enactment of the Bill is currently set for June 2021.

Both privacy and data protection issues are being fully considered during the drafting of the general scheme of the Bill. Relevant stakeholders such as the Irish Council for Civil Liberties and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission have been consulted.

I understand that in parallel, a business case is being prepared by An Garda Síochána in relation to the introduction of these cameras for operational members. I expect that this will be submitted to my Department after approval by the Commissioner.

Garda Recruitment

327. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if a new competition for Garda collision forensic investigators will be held in Q4 of 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7114/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and efficient use of resources. As Minister, I have no responsibility for 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 advised by the Garda authorities that there are no plans at present to hold a competition for the position of Garda Forensic Collision Investigator in 2020.

I am further informed that the numbers trained in Forensic Collision Investigation currently meet the required number for An Garda Síochána. The following table, furnished to me by the Garda authorities, sets out the numbers trained in Forensic Collision Investigation per Region, for the information of the Deputy.

Current Number of FCIs By Region

Area	Number
DMR	7
North Western Region	13

Southern Region	12
Eastern Region	10

Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service

328. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the estimated amount it would cost in 2021 if the budget for Irish Naturalisation and Immigrant Service increased by 6%; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7115/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Deputy will appreciate that the financial allocations are a matter for determination in the course of the estimates process in the normal way.

Following the recent transformation programme within my Department, the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service (INIS) is no longer a dedicated function within the Department. Its operations have transferred between various other functional areas including Immigration Service Delivery and the budget allocation has also been appropriated between these relevant units.

I can inform the Deputy that the outturn for INIS was €72.6 million last year. This figure does not include Direct Provision or certain funding streams in relation to refugee and migrant integration. An indicative increase of 6% would be in the region of €4.3 million, but reflected in a range of areas throughout the vote rather than in one specific immigration subhead.

Irish Prisoners Abroad

329. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of an application by a person (details supplied) to transfer to an Irish prison under the Transfer of Sentenced Persons Act 1995; the reason the application has been in the Office of the Chief State Solicitor for more than 12 months; when it will conclude its consideration of the application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7174/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I am informed by the Irish Prison Service that it is aware of the application referred to, and that the application made on behalf of the person referred to is under consideration.

The Deputy will appreciate that this area is extremely complicated, has resulted in a number of legal challenges over the past number of years and that applications can take a considerable period of time to assess and complete.

I am advised by the Prison Service that all matters referred to the Chief State Solicitor's Office in this instance are now complete. I am further advised that the application referred to is in the final stages of processing.

The Deputy will appreciate that I am not in a position to provide further information regarding this or any other individual case.

Question No. 330 answered with Question No. 319.

Immigration Status

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331. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the extent to which persons on stamp 4 or other similar or related categories have had their status updated notwithstanding the impact of Covid-19; if their legal position is clear with particular reference to those that have lived in this jurisdiction for several years with and without authorisation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7199/20]

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.

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.

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.

My Department has been engaging with the NGO sector on the issue of undocumented migrants. It is important to emphasise, that when it comes to people living here illegally, the only option for regularisation is on a case-by-case basis. Ireland along with other Member States of the EU, has committed, under the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum (2008), to a case-by-case approach as opposed to mass regularisation.

In all cases, people must engage with the authorities if they wish to be permitted to remain here legally. I would encourage any person who is resident in the State without permission to contact the Department or their local immigration office when they reopen to take all appropriate steps to regularise their own and their family's status.

As the Deputy will appreciate, high-demand public offices make applying social and physical distancing more difficult, and in recognition of these difficulties, 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.

Therefore the requirement to present at a registration office to register a new permission or renew a current permission is also temporarily suspended. 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.

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 exclu-

sively for other first time applicants.

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 and is available here:

<http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Immigration-Service-Delivery-Covid-19-FAQ4.pdf/Files/Immigration-Service-Delivery-Covid-19-FAQ4.pdf>.

Question No. 332 answered with Question No. 303.

Question No. 333 answered with Question No. 318.

Legislative Reviews

334. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality when the review of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017 due in March 2020 will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7344/20]

366. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality when the review of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017 due in March 2020 will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8040/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 334 and 366 together.

Part 4 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017 is due to be reviewed this year. This review arises under the provisions of the Act itself, and will include an assessment of the impact of the Act on the welfare of those who engage in sexual activity for payment.

The review will be conducted in an open and consultative manner and will take a broad approach to ensure consideration of the full range of issues raised in relation to the purchase of sex, can be examined in the context of the review. Deputies will appreciate that the approach to be adopted for the review, including the means for consultation with stakeholders, will need to take account of the current context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The approach to be adopted will be announced as soon as possible.

Finally, I can confirm that the report will be published by my Department when complete.

Garda Recruitment

335. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of persons approved for recruitment under the Garda recruitment competition which commenced at the end of 2018; the number successfully recruited as part of that campaign; the number that passed their interviews and tests and are waiting for Garda clearance or other inquiries before they are offered a position; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7389/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): Recruitment to An Gar-

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da Síochána is governed by the Garda Síochána (Admissions and Appointments) Regulations 2013. The Public Appointments Service (PAS), on behalf of the Garda Commissioner, manages the initial recruitment stages for selection of Garda Trainees. The final stages of the recruitment process in which candidates are vetted, complete a physical competency test and a medical examination, are managed by the Commissioner. As Minister, I have no direct involvement in the matter.

The following table, furnished to me by An Garda Síochána, sets out the information requested by the Deputy in relation to the Garda recruitment competition 2018.

Actions	Number
Number successfully recruited and commenced training	514
Number awaiting Garda clearance or other enquiries before being offered a position	177
Applications withdrawn/rejected/failed	287
Total number of persons approved by PAS	978

I am informed by the Garda authorities that, subject to final approval by An Garda Síochána, successful applicants from previous campaigns are considered first for intakes into the Garda College, in accordance with the candidate's place on the Order of Merit.

I am further informed that there is no set time frame for offers to be made to applicants as this is dependent on their files being fully completed and the intake dates into the Garda College. All applicants remain on the panel until such time as they are offered a place in the Garda College, with the exception of those who are deemed unsuitable, fail the Medical or Physical Competence Test (PCT) or withdraw from the competition.

Personal Insolvency Arrangements

336. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his plans to act on the recommendations made by the Insolvency Service of Ireland as part of its section 141 consultation submission made in June 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7390/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): My Department has completed extensive work on the review of Part 3 of the Personal Insolvency Acts 2012 to 2015, following the public consultation already held under section 141 of those Acts. Part 3 is the core of the personal insolvency legislation, dealing with the operation in practice of the three personal insolvency mechanisms – Debt Relief Notices, Debt Settlement Arrangements, and Personal Insolvency Arrangements.

In practice, the insolvency legislation has already been extensively reviewed and developed since 2012. Key reforms introduced include the section 115A court review process (which removed the so-called 'bank veto') enacted in 2015, interlocking reforms to bankruptcy also enacted in 2015, and the establishment in 2016, and extension in 2019, of the Abhaile Mortgage Arrears Resolution Service (which in effect ensures that borrowers at risk of losing their homes due to mortgage arrears can access free independent expert financial and legal advice to get solutions into place, and can access legal aid to support a section 115A court review application or appeal).

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Nevertheless, we have always said that we will keep this important legislation under review, and will take any further action needed to ensure that it operates effectively.

In the course of the public consultation, a range of detailed submissions was received. These have been carefully analysed, and a number of follow-up discussions have been held with the stakeholders concerned.

The submission from the Insolvency Service of Ireland highlighted a number of points where it believes legislative amendments would be beneficial. Given the ISI's statutory role in monitoring the operation of the personal insolvency system and advising me on matters related to their functions, their suggestions are particularly important for the review. Subsequent discussions with the ISI have highlighted additional possible changes to the Personal Insolvency Acts.

The ISI's Consultative Forum, which brings together a variety of stakeholders involved in personal insolvency, made a separate submission to the review, which indicated a strong level of consensus between representatives of debtors and creditors in support of specified measures to streamline the personal insolvency process.

Submissions received also suggested measures to extend access to personal insolvency options to a wider cohort of borrowers, and to encourage more constructive engagement with the legislation by both creditors and debtors, with a view to supporting and accelerating the agreement of sustainable statutory personal insolvency options.

All of these proposals are being considered as part of the review.

Following the closing date for submissions, some additional issues emerged, and the timeframe for the review was extended to allow these to be taken into account. Most of these have since been resolved by a series of important court judgments under the Personal Insolvency Acts. A small number of remaining points are likely to be the subject of recommendations by the review.

The finalisation of the review, in consultation with my colleague the Minister for Finance, has been delayed by other urgent legislative priorities related to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it remains an active priority for completion. As the Deputy is aware from my replies to his recent questions (Dáil Question No. 486 of 20 May 2020 and Covid-19 PQ 5.709 of 5 May 2020), those priorities include consideration of 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 expect the review report to be finalised by September, following further consultations with the Department of Finance, as required by s. 141 of the Acts, and with the Office of the Attorney General. That timetable, as the Deputy will appreciate, is of course subject to the legislative priorities that will be decided in the new Programme for Government.

Probation and Welfare Service

337. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason the changes have been made to the community return scheme; the reason persons that had their applications made to the Probation Service before the change had their cases investigated under the old scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7407/20]

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Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Community Return Scheme is an incentivised early release scheme co-managed by the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service. The Community Return Scheme was introduced in 2011 as a means of ensuring that where appropriate, prisoners released on Temporary Release engaged in structured activities within their communities, under the supervision of the Probation Service. Prisoners released on the Community Return Scheme contribute to their local communities by engaging in activities such as working in charity shops, maintenance of public areas, sports facilities etc. I am informed by my officials in the Irish Prison Service that all prisoners considered for early release under the Scheme are subject to a rigorous assessment process with the primary consideration being that of public safety.

The Programme has been a positive development since its inception. As well as allowing prisoners to complete their sentence by way of performing a service to the community, it has significantly helped these prisoners to successfully resettle in their communities.

The Scheme was evaluated in 2014 with that evaluation pointing to very high levels of compliance among prisoners at a rate of 89%.

The Scheme was further reviewed in 2019 and, acting upon the advice of my officials in both the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service, I broadened the eligibility criteria for the Scheme with a view to identifying further numbers of prisoners who could be released safely into the community in response to capacity issues across the prisons estate arising from rising prisoner numbers. The change in criteria was also linked to increasing the cohort of prisoners who could avail of the rehabilitative effects of participation in the scheme.

Those changes to the eligibility criteria were introduced in August 2019. I am informed by the Irish Prison Service that it has recently emerged that a misinterpretation of the eligibility criteria resulted in a very small number of prisoners (three) having their cases assessed for eligibility under the old criteria. However, I am further advised that those cases have since been referred for assessment for suitability for release under the Scheme, and that their applications are currently under active consideration.

Immigration Status

338. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if the legal status of those undocumented persons carrying out essential front-line services such as care workers will be regularised. [7451/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I can inform the Deputy that officials in my Department have been engaging with the NGO sector on the issue of undocumented migrants. I am aware of this cohort of undocumented migrants and the valuable work they undertake in the area of social care.

It is important to emphasise, that when it comes to people living here illegally, the only option for regularisation is on a case-by-case basis. Ireland, along with other Member States of the EU, has committed, under the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum (2008), to a case-by-case approach as opposed to mass regularisation.

In all cases, people must engage with the authorities if they wish to be permitted to remain here legally. I would encourage any person who is resident in the State without permission to contact the Department or their local immigration office and to take all appropriate steps to regularise their own and their family's status.

Garda Deployment

339. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of gardaí stationed in Athy, County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7471/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Deputy will be aware that the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no responsibility for 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.

The resources provided to An Garda Síochána have reached unprecedented levels, with an allocation for 2020 of €1.88 billion. This level of funding is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff and as a result, An Garda Síochána is a growing organisation. There are now over 14,700 Gardaí nationwide, supported by over 3,000 Garda staff and these numbers are continuing to grow. Taken together, this increase in the number of Garda members and staff is delivering a significant growth in operational policing hours nationwide.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the number of Gardaí stationed in Athy Garda Station as of 30 April 2020 was 32, including 4 Sergeants and 28 Gardaí.

The Deputy may wish to know that detailed information in relation to Garda numbers is available on my Department's website. This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána, at the following link: http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_March_2020.xlsx/Files/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_March_2020.xlsx

Additional information on Garda staff, the Garda Workforce and other facts and figures are available at the following links:

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Workforce

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/An_Garda_Siochana_facts_and_figures

Garda Divisional Headquarters

340. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of the provision of the new regional Garda headquarters in County Sligo as set out in the capital plan of his Department; the stage the project is at; when a planning application will be submitted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7508/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): As the Deputy will be aware, significant remedial works have already taken place in the existing Garda station in Sligo, including the complete upgrade of the three floors in the building containing the public office and the provision of new locker facilities. Further upgrade works are progressing and involve the provision of new cells and custody management facilities.

The Garda Commissioner has decided that rather than construct an entirely new building, as was originally intended under the PPP model, the upgrading of the existing station to a high standard will continue. I have been assured that the upgrades will ensure that accommodation needs are addressed and that the station is upgraded to meet the future operational requirements of Garda members, staff and the public who use it.

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The Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management and control of An Garda Síochána and for the effective and efficient use of Garda resources. Further and as the Deputy will be aware, the Office of Public Works (OPW) 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 OPW.

The overall priority of the Garda Building and Refurbishment Programme 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.

Legal Aid Service

341. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the amounts spent by the Legal Aid Board on solicitors, barristers and personal insolvency practitioners for applications under the Personal Insolvency Act 2012 in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to date in 2020, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7541/20]

348. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the amount spent by the Legal Aid Board to personal insolvency practitioners, solicitors and barristers, respectively under the PIA Review Legal Aid Service since its inception, that is, from 2016 to date; the details of the payments; the companies and persons that received same; the amount received by each company and person; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7621/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 341 and 348 together.

The following schedule sets out in tabular format the amounts spent by the Legal Aid Board on solicitors, barristers and personal insolvency practitioners for applications under the Personal Insolvency Act 2012 in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to date in 2020.

In a s.115A case, it is the borrower's personal insolvency practitioner (PIP) who must make the application for court review, explaining and certifying to the court by affidavit how he or she contends that the proposal made by the borrower satisfies the detailed statutory criteria which the judge has to apply in deciding whether the proposal has met the necessary standard.

Schedule

Fees paid (inc VAT) to personal insolvency practitioners, solicitors, and barristers in respect of legally aided applications under section 115A of the Personal Insolvency Act 2012 (as amended)

Financial Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	to April 2020
Fees to barristers	€21,402	€165,721	€424,385	€496,892	€140,450
Fees to personal insolvency practitioners	€36,900	€218,056	€707,410	€1,016,183	€281,045
Fees to solicitors	€38,561	€280,379	€891,071	€1,574,518	€755,329

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Financial Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	to April 2020
Totals	€96,863	€664,156	€2,022,866	€3,087,593	€1,176,824

Direct Provision System

342. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he will address issues related to a direct provision centre (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7552/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): I want to assure the Deputy that I, Minister Flanagan and our officials take the safety and well-being 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.

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 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 vast majority of the residents arrived in Cahersiveen on March 18 and 19. 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

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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 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 ended on 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 has been 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. Now that the outbreak has been declared over, he will remain at the centre until the end of May to support residents. 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 have held virtual clinics with residents and a telephone support service for residents across all centres, run by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), was

launched on 20 May.

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.

Direct Provision System

343. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if a rigorous testing and tracing system will be implemented in a direct provision centre (details supplied) to address the spread of Covid-19 in the setting. [7553/20]

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

However, I can confirm that testing of residents and staff has already been completed in Cahersiveen by HSE Public Health. An Outbreak Control Team, convened and led by the HSE with representatives of my Department and the centre management have managed the outbreak.

In line with our agreed policy with the HSE, anyone who tested positive has been moved to an offsite self-isolation facility to be 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 confirmed on 20 May 2020, that the outbreak was over and that the period of self-isolation for residents at the centre had ended. All residents are now subject to the same restrictions as everyone else under Phase 1 of the Government's Roadmap. This means that they can leave the centre for limited reasons including to exercise within 5km, to shop for essential items or to attend a medical appointment.

I fully appreciate that the period of restrictions and self-isolation will have been very difficult for the residents. I want to record my appreciation for their cooperation and understanding and for working with us and the HSE to bring the outbreak under control.

Peace Commissioners

344. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the peace commissioners appointed from 1 January 2017 to date; the county and subdistrict of each appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7586/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): Peace Commissioners are appointed by the Minister for Justice and Equality under Section 88 of the Courts of Justice Act, 1924.

While every effort is made to maintain accuracy, it should be noted that Peace Commissioner records are appointment based and they do not always reflect the actual situation on the ground because the Department is reliant on the Peace Commissioners and other interested parties to advise of changes in circumstances which may occur subsequent to appointment.

Individuals requesting the services of a Peace Commissioner are advised to contact local Gardaí to ensure that a particular listed individual is active and available. The details of appoint-

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ed Peace Commissioners are also retained by the Peace Commissioner Unit in my Department and my officials are happy to assist individuals who require the services of a Peace Commissioner. They can be contacted on (01) 4768637 or at info@justice.ie

This response interprets the Deputy's question as relating to the number of Peace Commissioners appointed in each county and sub-district between 2017 and 2020 to date.

The total number of Peace Commissioners appointed between 2017 and 2020 to date is 344.

The total number of Peace Commissioners appointed so far in 2020 is 38.

The total number of Peace Commissioners appointed in 2019 is 116.

The total number of Peace Commissioners appointed in 2018 is 121.

The total Number of Peace Commissioners appointed in 2017 is 69

Note: some Sub-districts are not identified in the table below.

Peace Commissioners appointed during 2017 and 2020 to date:

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2020-05-27_pq344-27-05-20_en.docx]-Peace Commissioners appointed

Direct Provision System

345. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of a matter relating to a direct provision centre (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7617/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): 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 vast majority of the residents arrived in Cahersiveen on March 18 and 19. 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 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 ended on 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 has been 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. Now that the outbreak has been declared over, he will remain at the centre until the end of May to support residents. 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.

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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 have held virtual clinics with residents and a telephone support service for residents across all centres, run by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), was launched on 20 May.

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. The support shown by the local community to the residents is greatly appreciated and I hope that once our centres are open to visitors again they will come and visit.

Public Inquiries

346. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of the statutory inquiry in respect of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7619/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Inquiry referred to by the Deputy is ongoing.

In November 2019, I granted an extension of time until June 2020 for the Inquiry. I am satisfied this was appropriate in order to ensure that sufficient time is available to allow a proper consideration of all relevant matters.

I am informed by the Judge conducting the inquiry that progress has been made since this date but that, in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, he is not currently in a position to meet with a number of witnesses although he is open to the possibility of conducting remote hearings, if the logistical arrangements can be made to do so.

In light of these circumstances, the Judge has requested a further extension within which to complete this work. My officials and I are currently considering this request.

Once I have received the final report, the question of whether any further action is warranted will be considered.

Direct Provision System

347. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if additional support and protection is being provided to LGBTI+ residents of direct provision centres during the Covid-19 pandemic; if his Department has engaged with the management of these centres to ensure safeguarding of LGBTI+ residents; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7620/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): As the Deputy will be aware, Minister Flanagan and I launched Ireland's National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019 – 2021 on 28 November last.

The Strategy contains over 100 actions that are aimed at promoting inclusion, protecting rights and improving the quality of life and wellbeing of LGBTI+ people. It reflects the commitment in the Programme for Government to create an equal, fair and inclusive society for all, to target discrimination and to enable LGBTI+ people to overcome the barriers they face.

The development of this Strategy was underpinned by a robust consultation process from October 2018 until February 2019 including a series of regional and thematically focused workshops. Specific workshop sessions were organised for international protection applicants, migrants and refugees.

Accordingly, the Strategy recognises the vulnerability of LGBTI+ people within the International Protection process and commits to measures to ensure they are treated sensitively and provided with appropriate supports over the course of the Strategy.

These measures include the introduction of new National Standards for our accommodation centres. The National Standards, published last August last year, were developed with UNHCR Ireland and members of the NGO community. The Standards are being implemented in new centres that are being contracted at present.

One of the Standards, which will benefit members of the LGBTI+ community in our accommodation centres, will be the need for continuous training to improve the service for all living in the centre, and confidential information provision through leaflets and posters in order to promote dignity.

I can also inform the Deputy of some current measures in place in our centres.

A Policy and Practice Document on safeguarding residents against Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence & Harassment is implemented in our accommodation centres, which includes safeguarding residents from harassment or violence based on their sexual orientation.

The International Protection Accommodation Service of my Department (IPAS) have staff present at the International Protection Office when a person first applies for International Protection. Should an applicant require accommodation or other services, IPAS determines the most suitable accommodation based on the needs of each individual or family group. Where a person discloses their self-determined identity to IPAS, they are, in so far as is possible and practicable, assigned accommodation based on their needs. This determination may include the provision of shared accommodation with a partner who is also seeking accommodation or being accommodated within the Direct Provision system. This would, of course, only apply where this information is disclosed.

At any time during their stay in an accommodation centre, a resident has the option to request a transfer to a more suitable centre. The policy of the IPAS is to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of all residents. Staff working in accommodation centres receive regular training to equip them with the skills to support all residents.

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The IPAS liaises with State and NGO support agencies to assist our residents who may need guidance or support. In this regard, LGBT Ireland work with residents in our centres who identify as LGBTI.

Since 2018, LGBT Ireland has facilitated a monthly peer support group for LGBTI+ people in the International Protection process. Is Rainbow Muid continues to be active and provide vital supports to LGBTI+ people living in our accommodation centres at this time.

I can also advise the Deputy that IPAS together with the Inclusion, Equality and Gender Equality Unit of my Department are in the process of developing a broad LGBTI+ policy, which will include a transgender accommodation policy to promote equality, take account of people's self-determined identity and ensure that the safety and wellbeing of all residents is also promoted. It had been hoped that the LGBTI+ policy for IPAS would be finalised by the end of the first quarter of this year. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to the Covid-19 crisis. However, important contacts have been made between IPAS and support agencies in the LGBTI community and a meeting between LGBT Ireland and IPAS took place at the beginning of March 2020. Further meetings with TENI and BelongTo will be arranged as soon as possible.

Question No. 348 answered with Question No. 341.

Garda Data

349. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of gardaí by rank attached to the Wexford Garda division drugs unit as of 31 December 2018 and 15 May 2020, in tabular form. [7629/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no responsibility for 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.

In relation to the specific location referred to by the Deputy, I am informed by the Garda authorities that there were 5 Gardaí assigned to the Wexford Divisional Drugs Unit at 31 December 2018. I am further informed that as at 30 April 2020, the latest date for which figures are available, there were 8 Gardaí assigned to the Wexford Divisional Drugs Unit.

I understand that overall, there are now 278 Garda personnel in Divisional Drugs Units as of 30 April 2020, assigned to tackle drug related crime on a local basis throughout the country supported, as needed, by the Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau which has 89 Gardaí attached to it as of 30 April 2020.

More generally, the Deputy may wish to be aware that the resources provided to An Garda Síochána have reached unprecedented levels, with an allocation for 2020 of €1.88 billion. This level of funding is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff and as a result, An Garda Síochána is a growing organisation. There are now over 14,700 Gardaí nationwide, supported by over 3,000 Garda staff and these numbers are continuing to grow. Taken together, this increase in the number of Garda members and staff is delivering a significant increase in operational policing hours nationwide.

A detailed breakdown of Garda numbers is available on my Department's website. This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána. Information on Garda staff, the Garda Workforce and other facts and figures are available from the

following links: http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Workforce

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/An_Garda_Siochana_facts_and_figures

Garda Recruitment

350. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if he has given consideration to increasing the recruitment age for gardaí beyond 35 years of age; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7646/20]

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, which is being conducted under ‘*A Policing Service for the Future*’. Work is currently underway on the drafting of Terms of Reference for a Working Group which will bring this review forward, once established.

Direct Provision System

351. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of community response forums that contain direct representation from persons living in direct provision, including asylum seekers in temporary emergency accommodation, by county; if they are not directly represented, if an assessment is being carried out in each county to ascertain if information is being adequately relayed from the forum to this cohort of persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7647/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy David Stanton): I can inform the Deputy that the Community Response Forums are administered by the Local Authorities which are under the remit of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. Therefore, it is not possible for my Department to provide the information requested.

The Community Call initiative is a coming together of national government, local government and the community and voluntary sector, to put in place a safety net for people who are cocooning or self-isolating and need extra help at this time, particularly if their usual networks of support are not able to reach them.

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On Friday, 27 March 2020, following the announcement by the Taoiseach of the introduction of strict measures to control the spread of COVID-19, my colleague, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government directed all local authority chief executives to establish a Community Call Forum to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable in their communities.

Each Community Call Forum brings together all the principal response agencies in the public sector, including the HSE, An Garda Síochána and Civil Defence, and Community and Voluntary organisations responding locally to this emergency.

The role of the Forum is to ensure that everyone who needs support is identified, that the support required is carefully assessed and that the appropriate support is provided by a tried and trusted source. Each Forum is providing practical supports like the collection and delivery of food, meals, fuel, medication, pensions and other essential items, in strict accordance with public health advice.

The Deputy may be interested in accessing the following Government data hub which contains some useful facts and figures on the Community Call Forum -

<https://community-call-covid-19-geohive.hub.arcgis.com/>

Garda Recruitment

352. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of applicants in the recruitment process to An Garda Síochána when the Covid-19 crisis and lockdown commenced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7672/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): Recruitment to An Garda Síochána is governed by the Garda Síochána (Admissions and Appointments) Regulations 2013. The Public Appointments Service (PAS), on behalf of the Garda Commissioner, manages the initial recruitment stages for selection of Garda Trainees with the final stages of the recruitment process in which candidates are vetted, complete a physical competency test and a medical examination, are managed by the Commissioner. As Minister, I have no direct involvement in the matter.

I am informed by Garda authorities that when the Covid-19 pandemic began to impact on Ireland and public health restrictions were put in place, 1,031 applicants had been approved by PAS and were progressing through latter stages of the Garda Trainee selection process in which candidates are vetted, complete a Physical Competency Test (PCT) and a medical examination.

As the Deputy will appreciate, applicants must be successful at all elements of this process in order to be deemed suitable and eligible to be recruited as a Garda trainee.

It should also be noted that subject to final approval by An Garda Síochána, successful applicants from earlier campaigns (where the recruitment panels arising from those campaigns are not yet exhausted) are considered first for intakes into the Garda College, in accordance with the candidate's place on the Order of Merit.

There is no set time frame for offers to applicants as this is dependent on their files being fully completed and the intake dates into the Garda College. All applicants remain on the panel until such time as they are offered a place in the Garda College, with the exception of those who are deemed unsuitable, fail the Medical or PCT or withdraw from the competition.

Garda Data

353. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of gardaí currently issued with firearms cards; the equivalent figures in each of the previous nine years; the number of times gardaí have fired lethal firearms in each of the past ten years; and if the discharges were accidental or not. [7715/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): In accordance with the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Commissioner is responsible for the direction and control of An Garda Síochána. The Commissioner is also responsible for the day to day management of An Garda Síochána which includes operational matters.

I have contacted An Garda Síochána in relation to the information sought and will write directly to the Deputy when a response is available.

Crime Data

354. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of persons arrested to date by An Garda Síochána in the Dublin Metropolitan Region for being in breach of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020. [7793/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): As the Deputy will appreciate, An Garda Síochána has been carrying out extensive operations in support of the public health guidelines in place in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Garda action in this regard is underpinned by primary and secondary legislation introduced by the Minister for Health and in particular the additional temporary powers provided for under section 31A of the Health Act 1947 and brought into effect by the Health Act 1947- Section 31A- Temporary Restrictions (COVID 19) Regulations 2020.

A range of actions are being taken to ensure that the policing of these public health restrictions is carried out in an appropriate, proportionate and human rights compliant manner.

The Garda Commissioner and his senior team have implemented a carefully graduated policing response, based on its strong tradition of policing by consent. Garda members engage, explain and encourage members of the public to comply and, only as a last resort, make use of their enforcement powers under these regulations.

As Minister, I have taken a number of specific actions in the interest of transparency and in order to maintain public trust and confidence in the manner in which these powers are being exercised.

First, I requested the Garda Commissioner to compile and publish a record of any use of these temporary powers, and he is going so on a weekly basis.

Second, I also requested the Policing Authority to engage with the Commissioner to independently assess and report regularly on the use of these regulations. The Authority is providing me with reports of this kind on a fortnightly basis.

Third, I have made this information on the use of An Garda Síochána of these powers and associated monitoring by the Policing Authority publicly available on my Department’s website.

The Deputy may wish to note that the latest figures published by An Garda Síochána show

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that from 8 April, when the regulations came into effect, until 23 May 2020 inclusive, Gardaí have invoked the regulations 263 times out of more than one million interactions with the public. These include both arrests and incidents without arrest where name and address details were taken for consultation with the DPP on the decision to issue charges. Arrest remains a last resort.

The third report of the Policing Authority, dated 20 May, indicates that An Garda Síochána is continuing to act in a sensitive and proportionate manner and to use the powers provided for under the Health Regulations only sparingly. The report also identified clear evidence of the consistent application of the law and of policy throughout the country by Gardaí in all circumstances. It contains some geographic breakdown of the incidents where an Garda Síochána have invoked these powers - in particular, the report states that for the period 8 April until 16 May, 44% of incidents associated with Covid-19 Policing activity occurred in the Dublin Metropolitan Region.

This and more information is available on my Department's website at the following link: http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Use_of_Covid-19_related_powers_by_An_Garda_S%C3%ADoch%C3%A1na

Courts Service

355. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason for the delay until February 2020 in his Department providing the family of a person (details supplied) with a December 2017 Courts Service report that was directed to be furnished to them in May 2018 by the Attorney General, senior counsel and him; the reason a freedom of information application for this report was denied; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7798/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I can inform the Deputy that my Department is in ongoing correspondence with the family in question about this issue and has provided what information is in its possession on the causes of the delay in releasing the documents to them. They have now been provided with the report, and Judge Haughton has agreed to include this report within the remit of his scoping exercise.

The Deputy is mistaken in the assertion that a freedom of information request for this report was denied. The report by the Courts Service was, in fact, provided under a Freedom of Information request and indeed was retrieved in the course of retrieving records for that request. Hard copy records had been provided to the requester. When the existence of additional paper records was discovered, including the report from the Courts Service, these records were also provided to the requester.

Immigration Status

356. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of an application by a person (details supplied); when a decision will be made; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7816/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I am advised by the Immigration Service of my Department that an application for permission to remain was received by the relevant Unit, from the person referred to by the Deputy. A decision will issue by post once current restrictions are eased.

Questions - Written Answers

As the Deputy will appreciate, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the way the Immigration Services (ISD) of my Department conduct its business. In line with advice issued by Government, the HSE and the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), ISD have implemented a suite of measures to help reduce the spread of the virus. These measures include the closure of our offices in Burgh Quay and the implementation of remote working for Immigration Services staff in order to comply with social and physical distancing measures. These measures have unfortunately led to a reduction in processing capacity. While delays are expected, ISD is endeavouring to keep operating to the best of its ability.

Further updates will be provided on the Immigration Service website when available, and I would encourage the Deputy to view our updates and a detailed Frequently Asked Questions document 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 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. 357 answered with Question No. 303.

Peace Commissioners

358. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if an up-to-date list of peace commissioners and commissioners of oaths in County Meath will be provided. [7864/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): Peace Commissioners are appointed by the Minister for Justice and Equality under Section 88 of the Courts of Justice Act, 1924.

There are 147 Peace Commissioners appointed in Co. Meath.

While every effort is made to maintain accuracy, I must caution that this list is not always up to date in taking account of changes in the personal circumstances of individual Peace Commissioners since their appointment. My Department is reliant on the Peace Commissioners and other interested parties to advise of such changes in circumstances.

Individuals requesting the services of a Peace Commissioner are advised to contact local Gardaí to ensure that a particular listed individual is active and available. The details of appointed Peace Commissioners are also retained by the Peace Commissioner Unit in my Department and my officials are happy to assist individuals who require the services of a Peace Commissioner. They can be contacted at info@justice.ie.

Peace Commissioners appointed in Co Meath, by Garda sub-district

Sub-district	Name
Ashbourne	Cleary, Billy
Ashbourne	Conway Smith, Rosemary
Ashbourne	Conway, Carmel

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Sub-district	Name
Ashbourne	Duff, Ronald P
Ashbourne	Flanagan, Bernadette
Ashbourne	Keenan, Thomas A.
Ashbourne	Killian, Nick
Ashbourne	McCarthy-Smith, Carmel
Ashbourne	O'Brien, Terence
Ashbourne	O'Grady, Sean
Ashbourne	Tobin, Alan
Athboy	Gallagher, Oliver
Athboy	Kelly, Cornelius
Athboy	MacDonncha, Padraig
Athboy	Murphy, Martin J.
Athboy	Sweeney, Niall
Ballivor	Cloak, Noel
Ballivor	Cunningham, Patrick John
Ballivor	Darby, Thomas Edward
Ballivor	Dargan, James
Ballivor	De Lacy, Philomena
Ballivor	Feeney, Andrew Oliver
Ballivor	Feeney, Patrick
Crossakiel	Cahill, James
Crossakiel	Carney, Patrick
Crossakiel	Coyne, Sean
Crossakiel	Fox, John O.
Crossakiel	Travers, John J.
Duleek	Corry, Stephen
Duleek	Heeney, Noel
Duleek	Keogan, Sharon
Duleek	Lynch, Richard J.
Duleek	Sullivan, Thomas
Dunboyne	Carey, Kevin
Dunboyne	Clarke, James W.
Dunboyne	Conniffe, Michael
Dunboyne	Field, Finian
Dunboyne	Fitzgerald, John
Dunboyne	Fox, Joseph S.
Dunboyne	Gunning, Hugh
Dunboyne	Henry, Seán
Dunboyne	Hughes, Daniel
Dunboyne	Leonard, Noel
Dunboyne	Mahon, Thomas
Dunboyne	Muldoon, Eoin
Dunboyne	Murphy, Maria
Dunboyne	O'Reilly, Damien

Questions - Written Answers

Sub-district	Name
Dunboyne	Purcell, Eamon J.
Dunboyne	Quinn, Paul
Dunboyne	Rodgers, Richard Mark
Dunboyne	Sheridan, Patrick J.
Dunboyne	Ward, Robert A.
Dunshaughlin	Boyce, Alan
Dunshaughlin	Downes, Joseph B.
Dunshaughlin	Faughnan, Stephen
Dunshaughlin	Flynn, Seamus
Dunshaughlin	Harrahill, Mary
Dunshaughlin	Lynch, Jonathan
Dunshaughlin	Molloy, Nicholas
Dunshaughlin	O'Connor, Gerry
Dunshaughlin	Ralph, Andrew
Enfield	Hackett, John
Enfield	Carey, William
Enfield	Costello, Martin
Enfield	Holton, Marguerita
Enfield	Holton, Patrick Joseph
Enfield	Mallon, Niamh Maria
Enfield	McGuinness, Trudy
Enfield	Prendergast, Patrick J.
Kells	Brady, John
Kells	Clarke, Bartholomew
Kells	Eiffe, Daniel
Kells	Gibney, Christopher
Kells	Gormally, Patrick Joseph
Kells	Greene, James
Kells	McCabe, Patrick
Kells	O'Neill, Marie
Kells	O'Reilly, Ciarán
Kells	Reilly, Bryan M.
Kells	Sullivan, John J.
Kilmessan	Swan, Rosemary
Laytown	Campbell, Colin
Laytown	Cassidy, Aidan
Laytown	Colville, Joseph
Laytown	Curran, Greg
Laytown	Darcy, Peter
Laytown	Downey, Peggy
Laytown	Kelly, Thomas
Laytown	Tolan, Sharon
Longwood	Cummins, Patrick G.
Longwood	Murray, Seamus

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Sub-district	Name
Moynalty	McCabe, Paul
Navan	Collier, Eamonn
Navan	Corcoran, Laurence
Navan	Crahan, Sean
Navan	Daly, Michael J.
Navan	Donegan, Kevin J.
Navan	Duffy, John
Navan	Ennis, Andrew Anthony
Navan	Fitzpatrick, Daniel J.
Navan	Fogarty, Denis
Navan	Healy, Richard
Navan	Henry, James Joseph
Navan	Kelly, Ross
Navan	Marry, Oliver
Navan	Marry, Paschal
Navan	McCormack, Laurence
Navan	Murphy, Paul
Navan	O'Connor, Thomas
Navan	O'Donoghue, John Patrick
Navan	O'Neill, Patrick
Navan	Quinn, Larry
Nobber	Shankey, John
Oldcastle	Curran, Thomas
Oldcastle	Farrelly, Gerard
Oldcastle	Gibney, John
Oldcastle	Gibney, Thomas
Oldcastle	Hamilton, Thomas
Oldcastle	Haughney, James
Oldcastle	Kellett, Thomas P.
Oldcastle	Masterson, James
Oldcastle	O'Reilly, Edward
Slane	Gough, Hugh
Slane	Macken, Kevin John
Slane	Mitchell, Anthony L.
Slane	O'Brien, Frank
Slane	Rooney, Andrew
Summerhill	Fagan, Shena Rose Anne
Summerhill	Gannon, Patrick John
Summerhill	McKeogh, Michael
Summerhill	Moore, James
Summerhill	O'Neill, Jim
Summerhill	O'Rourke, Dennis
Summerhill	Shannon, Patrick J.
Trim	Anderson, Paul

Questions - Written Answers

Sub-district	Name
Trim	Cantwell, Martin Philip
Trim	Cheevers, Mark
Trim	Cheevers, Tara
Trim	Clancy, Liam
Trim	Cleary, Chris
Trim	Gorry, Bríd
Trim	Griffith, Robert Kiernan
Trim	Lenihan, Thomas Michael Patrick Joseph
Trim	McGonagle, Eugene
Trim	McHugh, Thomas Vincent
Trim	Reilly, Terence
Trim	Rispin, Christopher

Commissioners for Oaths are appointed by the Chief Justice and the records of their appointments are held by the Supreme Court Office. As the Deputy is aware, under the provisions of the Courts Service Act 1998, management of the courts is the responsibility of the Courts Service, which is independent in exercising its functions. In order to be of assistance, I have had enquiries made and a list of Commissioners for Oaths in the Meath area has been provided.

As I have previously outlined in relation to the information provided on Peace Commissioners, while every effort is made to maintain accuracy, I must caution that this list of Commissioners for Oaths is not always up to date in taking account of changes in the personal circumstances of individual Commissioners for Oaths since their appointment. The Supreme Court Office is reliant on the Commissioners of Oaths to inform them of such changes in circumstances. Moreover, I understand that the list provided is very likely to contain the names of Commissioners for Oaths who have passed away. In providing the Deputy with this information, therefore, I would be anxious that the information be handled sensitively and that it would not be a source of upset to family members of a Commissioner of Oaths (or indeed a Peace Commissioner) within the lists who have since passed away. Due to the nature of the Commissioner of Oaths records, some of which are paper based and contained in ledger books while more recently moving to the electronic recording of this information, the Courts Service have advised that there is a small margin of error when creating a list to cover a full county area spanning many decades as this one does.

Commissioners for Oaths in Meath

Names	Names	Names	Names
Mary Farnan	Michael Cooney	Annette Kelly	Vincent O'Reilly
Rachel Ginnity	Frank Dunne	Louis Noonan	Thomas Kelly
Norbert Smith	Michael Weldon	Thomas Noonan	Dermot Morris
Seamus Murphy	James Carolan	Edward Rogers	Thomas Daniel
PJ McKenna	Mary Connell	William F. Dunphy	Paul Brady
James Walsh	Rosemary Daniel	Joseph Murphy	Ambrose Steen
Finian Field	James P Gibney	Andrew Donnelly	Mary O'Malley
Helena Gordon	Timothy McCarthy	Martin Shortt	Patrick Ronald Duff
Margaret O'Rafferty	Oliver Farrell	Desmond Griffin	Noel O'Brien
Peter J Fulham	Mary Smith	Brendan Carley	Oliver Shanley

Names	Names	Names	Names
Sean Clarkin			

Personal Insolvency Arrangements

359. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality further to Parliamentary Question No. 202 of 28 January 2016, the progress made in introducing a streamlined process to register satisfaction of judgment debts in the appropriate court register in respect of judgment debts discharged under the Personal Insolvency Acts since his predecessor confirmed the matter was being examined in January 2016; his plans to introduce measures to permit personal insolvency practitioners or the Insolvency Service of Ireland to do same; if the satisfaction of the judgment process generally will be simplified; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7889/20]

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 is the responsibility of the Courts Service, which is independent in exercising its functions, including the provision of information on the courts system. However, in order to be of assistance to the Deputy, I have had enquiries made with the Courts Service.

The current work in developing a programme to implement the Courts Service's modernisation plan includes streamlining civil processes and digitising services in areas where necessary and appropriate to customer needs. The provision for a register of debts registered and satisfaction pieces lodged will be considered as part of this modernisation programme. Progress on the various aspects of the Courts Service's modernisation programme will necessarily be dependent on the priorities identified, and availability of the required budget and resources.

It may be of interest to the Deputy to note that the courts process for registering satisfaction of judgment debts was not identified as a priority in the submissions made by stakeholders to my Department regarding review of personal insolvency legislation and procedures.

Legal Aid Service

360. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the amounts paid by the Legal Aid Board to personal insolvency practitioners, solicitors and barristers under the PIA Review Legal Aid Service since its inception; the details of these payments; the companies and persons that received same; the amount received by each company and person; the amounts that have been incurred but are unpaid by the Legal Aid Board to personal insolvency practitioners, solicitors and barristers under the PIA Review Legal Aid Service since its inception; the details of these liabilities; the companies and persons to which they are owed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7950/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I have had inquiries made with the Legal Aid Board and am informed that the Legal Aid Board is not in a position to provide information as to individual amounts accrued in connection with individual service providers. It is for the person granted legal aid to engage their own solicitor from the panel on foot of a legal aid certificate and for that solicitor (if authorised to do so) to instruct Counsel. The Legal Aid Board does not generally become aware of which solicitor and barrister have been engaged on the individual legally-aided person's behalf until a claim for payment on behalf of that solicitor or barrister is received.

Questions - Written Answers

Schedule A sets out in tabular format the amounts spent by the Legal Aid Board on solicitors, barristers and personal insolvency practitioners for applications under the Personal Insolvency Act 2012 in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to the 30th April 2020.

Schedule B sets out in tabular format the amount paid to by the Legal Aid Board to each individual solicitor, barrister and personal insolvency practitioner for applications under the Personal Insolvency Act 2012 in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to the 30th April 2020.

Schedule C sets out in tabular format the total amounts incurred but not yet paid by the Legal Aid Board in connection with solicitors, barristers and personal insolvency practitioners for applications under the Personal Insolvency Act 2012 as at 22nd May 2020.

[Details of Payments]

Garda Equipment

361. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of Garda mountain bikes allocated to each Garda district within the Meath Garda division as of 31 December 2018 and 18 May 2020, in tabular form. [7960/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Deputy will be aware that 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. Decisions in relation to the effective and efficient use of resources, including purchase and allocation of mountain bikes, are for the Commissioner in light of operational demands. I understand that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, so as to ensure their optimum use.

I have requested information from An Garda Síochána on the matter requested by the Deputy and will write directly to the Deputy when it is received.

Garda Data

362. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of gardaí by rank attached to the Meath Garda division as of 18 May 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7961/20]

363. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of gardaí by rank attached to Meath Garda roads policing unit as of 18 May 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7962/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 362 and 363 together.

The Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no responsibility for 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.

The resources provided to An Garda Síochána have reached unprecedented levels, with

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an allocation for 2020 of €1.88 billion. This level of funding is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff and as a result, An Garda Síochána is a growing organisation. There are now over 14,700 Gardaí nationwide, supported by over 3,000 Garda staff and these numbers are continuing to grow. Taken together, this increase in the number of Garda members and staff is delivering a significant increase in operational policing hours nationwide.

Specifically in relation to Meath Division, I am informed by the Garda authorities that as of the end of April 2020, a total of 346 Garda members were assigned to the Meath Division, in addition to 41 Garda staff. This represents a significant increase in recent years: I understand that by contrast, in December 2015 there were a total of 277 Garda members and 26 Garda staff in the Division.

I am further informed that, as at 30 April 2020, the latest date for which figures are available, the strength of the Roads Policing Units stands at 739 Garda members. Of this, I understand that 18 Gardaí and 2 Sergeants were specifically assigned to Meath Roads Policing Unit as on the same date.

The Deputy may wish to be aware that a detailed breakdown of Garda numbers is available on my Department's website, in the interests of transparency and for the convenience of Deputies and the wider public. This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána. Information on Garda members is available at the following link:

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_March_2020.xlsx/Files/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_March_2020.xlsx

Information on the Garda workforce including Garda staff is available at the following link:

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Workforce

Personal Insolvency Arrangements

364. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality his plans to amend the personal insolvency legislation to ensure that persons who fall into mortgage arrears can avail of personal insolvency arrangements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7996/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Insolvency Acts 2012 to 2015 already provide for a number of mechanisms to help individuals who are unable to pay their debts by reason of insolvency, namely Debt Relief Notices, Debt Settlement Arrangements and Personal Insolvency Arrangements (which apply to people with secured debts such as mortgages and unsecured debt).

In practice, the insolvency legislation has already been extensively reviewed and developed since 2012. Key reforms introduced include the section 115A court review process (which removed the so-called 'bank veto') enacted in 2015, interlocking reforms to bankruptcy also enacted in 2015, and the establishment in 2016, and extension in 2019, of the Abhaile Mortgage Resolution Service in effect ensures that borrowers at risk of losing their homes due to mortgage arrears can access free independent expert financial and legal advice and in certain cases legal aid.

Nevertheless, we have always said that we will keep this important legislation under review, and will take any further action needed to ensure that it operates effectively. My Department

is currently engaged in preparatory work for two sets of legislative changes to the legislation.

Firstly, 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. Subject to Government formation and to reconstitution of both Houses of the Oireachtas, the intention is to bring forward for Government approval, a short urgent Bill, in order to make any necessary amendments as soon as possible.

Secondly, my officials are already working to complete the major statutory review of the Personal Insolvency Acts, following the earlier public consultation already held, and now, in addition, to ensure that this review will also take full account of the latest developments and particularly, the significant economic effects of the Covid-19 outbreak.

I expect the review report to be finalised by September, following further consultations with the Department of Finance, as required by s. 141 of the Acts, and with the Office of the Attorney General. That timetable, as the Deputy will appreciate, is of course subject to the legislative priorities that will be decided in the new Programme for Government.

Immigration Status

365. Deputy Catherine Connolly asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the position in relation to students from abroad whose studies were interrupted who wish to return to complete their studies and whose visas have since expired; if they will be permitted to return to complete their studies; the documentation required to facilitate same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8036/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Deputy may be aware that, on 13 May 2020, I announced that immigration permissions due to expire between 20 May and 20 July 2020 will be automatically extended for two months. Any permission which was renewed by an earlier notice of 20 March 2020 and which therefore has a new expiry date between 20 May 2020 and 20 July 2020 is also renewed. Provided the person otherwise meets the conditions set out in the notices, this exceptional temporary measure also applies to non-nationals currently outside the State.

The extension means that they may continue to work if they wish, but must also re-enrol in an on-line course of study to adhere to the conditions of their permission.

My Department has engaged with MEI (Marketing English in Ireland), the representative body for the majority of language schools in Ireland. MEI have confirmed that most colleges are now offering on-line courses, and students should contact their college directly to make any necessary arrangements.

I can also inform the Deputy that I made a further announcement on 26 May 2020 setting out further measures to assist international students studying English in Ireland who have been impacted upon by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The new measures are as follows:

- Students who left the State before completion of their studies due to COVID-19 may return and resume their studies and the duration of their absence will not count towards the two years maximum period of English language study allowed; and

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- International English language students with a current, valid permission who are still in the State and who have completed the maximum two years permitted as a language student, but due to COVID-19 are unable to return home, may remain as students until the end of the year provided they re-enrol in an online course of study for the remainder of the year.

I understand and recognise the difficulties that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on all immigrants, and in particular our international student population. I was, therefore, pleased to be able to announce these new measures to support students, which I hope will provide some welcome assurance and certainty for the coming months. We will continue to keep the situation under active review as matters evolve in our national response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The renewal of permission is on the same basis as the existing permission and the same conditions attach. This means, for instance, that students will need to ensure that they remain enrolled on their course of study.

Visa required students will need to apply for a visa before returning to the State if the validity period of the visa has expired. While the Immigration Service has temporarily ceased accepting new visa applications, persons legally resident in the State are included in the categories of Priority/Emergency cases, which will continue to be processed. Visa required students are advised to consult the Immigration Service website for the required documentation - *www.inis.gov.ie*.

I can also advise the Deputy that while both the Dublin area Registration Office in Burgh Quay and regional Registration Offices operated by An Garda Síochána remain temporarily closed, arrangements have been put in place for students awaiting first time registration, students who wish to change their permission applications and students who wish to avail of the Third Level Graduate Programme.

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 all students to regularly consult 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 also available on this website on the impact of COVID-19 on immigration and international protection. This document is regularly updated.

Question No. 366 answered with Question No. 334.

Immigration Status

367. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if a decision will be expedited in the case of a person (details supplied). [8061/20]

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 and international protection permissions, due to expire between 20 May 2020 and 20 July 2020, have been automatically extended for two months.

Questions - Written Answers

This includes permissions that have already been extended by the previous notice, which extended permissions due to expire between 20 March 2020 and 20 May 2020 and includes Labour Market Access Permissions as long as the person has not received a final decision on their protection application. The renewal of permission is on the same basis as the existing permission and the same conditions are attached. Employers can be directed to the Immigration Service website (www.inis.gov.ie) for confirmation of this.

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.

Since mid-March, all Temporary Residence Cards (TRCs) that were due to expire were automatically renewed for a further two month period. Following the announcement on 20 May, applicants whose TRC is due for renewal between 27 March and 20 July will have a new card automatically issued to them to cover them for the period. The International Protection Office will send the new TRC to applicants by post so there is no need to present to the office in person for the purposes of renewal. Anyone who has concerns about their replacement card should contact the IPO customer help desk at info@ipo.gov.ie.

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.

Student Visas

368. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the work being carried out to support English language students here; if he has considered the suspension of student visas until September 2020 or such a point when face-to-face classes can be resumed; if he has considered a guarantee that time lost due to school closures will not count towards the total number of months permitted under a student visa; and if attendance at online classes will not be a visa requirement. [8090/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Deputy may be aware that, on 13 May 2020, I announced that immigration permissions due to expire between 20 May and 20 July 2020 will be automatically extended for two months. Any permission, including student permission, which was renewed by the earlier notice of 20 March 2020 and which therefore had a new expiry date between 20 May 2020 and 20 July 2020 is also renewed, provided the person otherwise meets the conditions set out in the notices. This exceptional temporary measure also applies to non-nationals currently outside the State.

The extension means that students may continue to work if they wish, but must also re-enrol in an on-line course of study to adhere to the conditions of their permission. The renewal of a permission is on the same basis as the existing permission and the same conditions attach. This means, for instance, that students will need to ensure that they remain enrolled on their course of study.

My Department has engaged with MEI (Marketing English in Ireland), the representative

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body for the majority of language schools in Ireland. MEI have confirmed that most colleges are now offering on-line courses, and students should contact their college directly to make any necessary arrangements.

I wish to assure the Deputy that I understand and recognise the difficulties that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on all immigrants, and in particular our international student population.

I announced yesterday, 26 May, that students who are still in the State and who have completed their maximum 2 years language study, but due to COVID-19 are unable to return home at this time, may remain as students until the end of the year provided they re-enrol in an online course of study for the remainder of the year. They will have to register the permission as usual once the Registration Offices reopen.

I also announced that language students who left the State before completion of their studies due to COVID-19, may resume their studies and the duration of their absence will not count towards the maximum period of study allowed.

I hope these new measures will provide some welcome assurance and certainty for the coming months and we will continue to keep the situation under active review as matters evolve in our national response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These new measures are in addition to the previously announced, temporary arrangements put in place for students awaiting first time registrations, students who wish to change their permission and students who wish to avail of the Third Level Graduate Programme.

In previous announcements I also amended the rules around working hours and provided that where a school or college is physically closed due to COVID-19 students can work 40 hours per week instead of the previous 20 hours. However, as I announced on 13 May, it is a requirement that anyone seeking to remain in the State as a student has to re-enrol in an online course of study.

It should be noted that visa required students will be required to apply for a visa before returning to the State if the validity period of the visa has expired. While the Immigration Service has temporarily ceased accepting new visa applications, persons legally resident in the State are included in the categories of Priority/Emergency cases, which will continue to be processed. Visa required students are advised to consult the Immigration Service website for the required documentation - www.inis.gov.ie.

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 all students to regularly consult 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.

Prisoner Health

369. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if an up to date

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risk assessment has been carried out in relation to managing the risk of Covid-19 entering the prison system and at the same time reducing the negative impact of these measures in the medium-term on prisoners and prison life; if plans are in place to ensure sufficient capacity for quarantining within the prison system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8131/20]

372. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the steps being taken as part of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business to lessen the restrictions in prisons due to the Covid-19 pandemic on a phased basis; if a roadmap in this regard has been published; if so, the location of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8134/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 369 and 372 together.

I have previously set out the wide range of measures adopted by the Irish Prison Service, to address the risk presented by Covid-19 in a prison environment.

Guided by the advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET), and consistent with the prison specific guidance for the management of Covid-19 issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) and guidance of the Council of Europe, measures introduced have included:

- The introduction of a basic health check, including taking of temperatures for all persons, including staff, entering prisons from 29 March;

- Suspension of physical family visits, replaced by the introduction of video visits;

- Quarantining for 14 days of all newly committed prisoners, in order to reduce the risk that a new committal who might be incubating the virus could spread Covid-19 to the general prison population;

- Isolation of suspected case or prisoner with symptoms to prevent the risk of transmission of infection;

- “cocooning” of vulnerable prisoners, including all prisoners aged 70 years or more or those who are deemed medically vulnerable;

- comprehensive training for IPS staff and the provision of appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) across the prison estate;

- strong communication with staff and prisoners, including two prison newsletters published weekly and regular Covid-19 information leaflets for prisoners and newsletters for staff regarding actions taken; and

- establishment of a robust contact tracing model which has been acknowledged by the World Health Organization as best practice.

The strategy employed by the Irish Prison Service to control the risks arising during this pandemic has to date been successful, thanks to the detailed planning carried out and the co-operation and understanding of all concerned, including both staff and prisoners. I understand that, as of 26 May 2020, there has been no positive prisoner case of Covid-19 within the Irish prison service.

I understand that the Irish Prison Service continues to manage the risks and challenges faced in a prison context during the Covid-19 pandemic in line with public health guidelines. In doing so, it maintains a close working relationship with my Department, relevant criminal justice authorities, the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) and the Health Service Ex-

ective (HSE).

As the Deputy will appreciate, the classification of prisoners as a vulnerable group by the NPHET means that the Irish Prison Service must exercise an abundance of caution in relation to the unwinding of the measures which are currently in place to reduce the risk of Covid-19 spreading in our prisons.

I am assured by the Irish Prison Service that its Emergency Response Planning Team is continually updating contingency plans in relation to Covid-19. I am further informed that these contingency plans are, by their nature, highly operational and are subject to change given the multiple scenarios that are possible. I am assured that the Irish Prison Service will publicise changes and plans in a timely manner, as the situation develops.

Specifically in relation to the Deputy's query on risk assessments, I am informed that, in the context of declining rates of infection in the community, the Irish Prison Service is currently carrying out a risk assessment to determine when and how the restrictions put in place in recent months may be eased, while also ensuring that it maintains control of the risk of the spread of infection and ensures good order and security in the prisons.

I understand that the risk assessment currently being undertaken includes the following elements:

- Reviewing the physical access in-reach services provided to the prisons, including psychology, education, chaplaincy and addiction counsellors. In terms of current arrangements it may be noted that to mitigate against the impact of these services not being available in a traditional manner, I understand the Prison Service has put in place a dedicated phone service for prisoners to reach out to chaplains, psychologists and addiction counsellors and that it has increased the use of technology to ensure these essential services continue.

- Reviewing at what stage and how physical visits with families may resume, while maintaining controls at point-of-entry to screen for the infection; maintaining social distancing in the waiting rooms and during visits. Pending any change and as the Deputy may be aware, additional phone calls have been provided to prisoners and a facility for family video-link calls has also been put in place.

- Reviewing the regime management plans in place, which restrict the movement of prisoners around the prison and impacts out-of-cell and yard time. Again it should be noted that to mitigate against the negative impact of the more restricted regimes in place during the current Covid-19 pandemic, I am informed that the Prison Service has ensured that gym facilities for prisoners remain opened, albeit on a reduced schedule and has taken a range of other measures including for example installation of additional TV channels for prisoners in their cells and issuance of a weekly newsletter to prisoners providing information on what the Irish Prison Service is doing and why.

- I am also informed that the Prison Service is working with the HSE to put in place a process that will facilitate the testing of all new committals to the prisons at an early stage, which will allow for the prisoner to exit quarantine and enter the general population at an earlier stage, provided test results are negative.

Finally, the Deputy may wish to be aware that the Irish Prison Service has assured me that it is at all times cognisant of the impact of its decisions on people in custody. This impact is taken into account at all times, including at every stage of the planning process and the implementing of actions necessary to control and mitigate against the risk of Covid-19 in the prison environment.

Prisoner Health

370. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reduction in the prison population needed to ensure there are adequate facilities available to deal with a possible outbreak of Covid-19 in the prison system; the criteria being used to determine Covid-19 related early releases to reduce overcrowding in the prison system; if this is purely risk based; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8132/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): As the Deputy will appreciate, Covid-19 provides unique challenges to custodial institutions, including our prisons. I have previously set out the wide range of measures adopted by the Irish Prison Service, to address the risk presented by Covid-19 in a prison environment.

Guided by the advice of 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 guidance of the Council of Europe, measures introduced have included:

- The introduction of a basic health check, including taking of temperatures for all persons, including staff, entering prisons from 29 March;

- Suspension of physical family visits, replaced by the introduction of video visits;

- Quarantining for 14 days of all newly committed prisoners, in order to reduce the risk that a new committal who might be incubating the virus could spread Covid-19 to the general prison population;

- Isolation of suspected case or prisoner with symptoms to prevent the risk of transmission of infection;

- “cocooning” of vulnerable prisoners, including all prisoners aged 70 years or more or those who are deemed medically vulnerable;

- comprehensive training for IPS staff and the provision of appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) across the prison estate;

- strong communication with staff and prisoners, including two prison newsletters published weekly and regular Covid-19 information leaflets for prisoners and newsletters for staff regarding actions taken; and

- establishment of a robust contact tracing model which has been acknowledged by the World Health Organization as best practice.

In addition and as the Deputy is aware, in March of this year, I approved actions to assist the Irish Prison Service in reducing the numbers of prisoners in custody.

In that context, the Irish Prison Service has been implementing measures to reduce the prison population, in order to ensure good infection control and to ensure that cells are available for the accommodation of any prisoner who may be required to isolate in accordance with guidance from the public health authorities.

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.

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I am informed that all prisoners granted temporary release were assessed on a case-by-case basis, utilising the existing criteria for temporary release. The primary factor in the consideration of any prisoner for early release remains public safety. 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 other criteria taken into account include the nature and gravity of the offence, length of sentence served to date, prior record on temporary release, behaviour while in custody and previous criminal history.

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 the prison population has reduced from a total of 4,214 on 12 March 2020 to a total of 3,755 on 26 May 2020. This represents a reduction of 459 or approximately 11% over the period. The range of measures introduced has therefore meant that the occupancy in many prisons has been reduced in order to support infection control and isolation measures as much as possible.

As the Deputy will appreciate, prisoners are considered a particularly vulnerable group and an outbreak of Covid-19 would present significant challenges for prison management in terms of controlling the spread among other inmates and prison staff. However the strategy employed by the Irish Prison Service to control the risks arising during this pandemic has to date been successful, thanks to the detailed planning carried out and the cooperation and understanding of all concerned, including both staff and prisoners. I understand that, as of 26 May 2020, there has been no positive prisoner case of Covid-19 within the Irish prison service.

I understand that the Irish Prison Service continues to manage the risks and challenges faced in a prison context during the Covid-19 pandemic in line with public health guidelines. In doing so, it maintains a close working relationship with my Department, relevant criminal justice authorities, NPHET and the HSE.

Prisoner Welfare

371. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the steps taken to ensure in the absence of visits to prisons due to the Covid-19 pandemic that prisoners have continued access to their families by way of phone and video calls; if the enhanced facilities have been extended to all prisoners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8133/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I have previously set out the wide range of measures adopted by the Irish Prison Service, to address the risk presented by Covid-19 in a prison environment. The measures adopted have been guided by the advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET), and consistent with the prison specific guidance for the management of Covid-19 issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) and guidance of the Council of Europe.

I understand that the Irish Prison Service is acutely aware of the supportive role that families and friends play in prisoners' efforts to rehabilitate themselves while in prison and in their preparation for life in the community after release from prison. I am advised that every effort was made to continue to facilitate physical family visits for as long as it was safe to do so and that physical visits were only ceased following the Government announcement in March, preventing all non-essential travel.

As I have previously set out, in recognition of the impact of visitor restrictions on prisoners, the Irish Prison Service introduced a number of initiatives to allow families to continue to com-

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communicate and support those in custody including through:

- The provision of additional phone calls for prisoners;
- The introduction of virtual visits, through the installation of video phone facilities in all prisons to allow for video-calls with families; and
- The introduction of Electronic Funds Transfer and An Post Bill Pay service to allow families to continue to lodge money to prisoner accounts.

I understand that the introduction of the new video visits system has allowed prisoners to continue to maintain important communication with their families. I am informed that to date feedback from prisoners and families that have used the system successfully has been very positive. I am also informed that, as with any new system and process, and especially one that is implemented within a very short time frame, there have been a number of challenges and technical issues with some calls but that the Prison Service continues to work on any issues to solve them. I understand that there have been particular difficulties in recent days, following a video phone software update which resulted in system crashes on a number of occasions in the past week. Resolution of this IT difficulty required temporary suspension of visits for a short time, but I understand that the system has now been restored. It is also the case that some issues may arise due to factors outside the control of the Irish Prison Service, which may include for example poor broadband coverage impacting connectivity for some visitors.

The Deputy may wish to note that useful “how to” guides are published on the Irish Prison Service website at www.irishprisons.ie for the information of people using the remote visit facilities. In addition, I understand that the Irish Prison Service has set up a dedicated helpline for the families of prisoners who may experience difficulty in connecting to a scheduled video call.

I am informed by the Irish Prison Service that where a scheduled video-call does not take place due to a technical problem, every effort is made to ensure that the prisoner is provided with the opportunity to have a normal phone call with their family member instead.

I am further informed that all new initiatives introduced have been risk assessed, to ensure there are measures in place to prevent the virus from spreading through prisoners sharing handsets or other equipment, and to ensure the maintenance of good order and security.

In the absence of direct contact from people in the outside community, I understand that the Irish Prison Service is at the same time taking steps to maintain good communication with prisoners and staff; and to allow prisoners to maintain human contact during these difficult times. I am informed that the Irish Prison Service has set up a dedicated team to co-ordinate the communication of information about the pandemic and its impact to prisoners.

I understand that two prisoner newsletters are published weekly, on a collaborative basis between the IPS, the Education and Training Board and the Irish Red Cross. Tailored regular communications with regular Covid-19 information leaflets for prisoners (developed by the prison Red Cross Prisoner Volunteers) and Covid-19 information newsletters for staff are being distributed to raise awareness of the particular risks the virus poses in a prison environment and to provide accessible updates on the necessary actions being taken. There is also a special newsletter for prisoners who are in quarantine or cocooning with tailored messaging for them. Prisoners who are in quarantine or cocooning can use the prisoner phone system to access prisoner services from Psychology, Chaplaincy, resettlement or Merchants Quay.

I understand that this system is being reviewed to ensure that it meets requirements and to assess if the service can be improved further. Further and in general, I understand that the Irish Prison Service continues to manage the risks and challenges faced in a prison context during

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the Covid-19 pandemic in line with public health guidelines. In doing so, it maintains a close working relationship with my Department, relevant criminal justice authorities, the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and the Health Service Executive (HSE).

Question No. 372 answered with Question No. 369.

Question No. 373 answered with Question No. 318.

Garda Data

374. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number and percentage of the Garda fleet of vehicles within the Clare division that are less than one, one to three, four to six, six to ten and more than ten years' old, in tabular form. [8147/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management and control of An Garda Síochána and for the effective and efficient use of Garda resources. This includes responsibility for allocation of Garda vehicles, in accordance with operational demand. As Minister, I have no role in that matter. 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 Garda authorities that as of 21 May 2020 there were 53 vehicles assigned to the Clare Division. The following table, furnished to me by the Garda authorities, sets out the age of the Clare Divisional fleet, including the percentage of vehicles in each age bracket.

Clare Divisional Fleet Vehicle	Age of	Number of Vehicles	% of Divisional Vehicles (rounded)
< 1 Year		6	11.3
1 to 3 Years		19	35.9
4 to 6 Years		13	24.5
6 to 10 Years		13	24.5
Over 10 years		2	3.8
Total		53	100

The Deputy may also be interested to know that 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.

The number and type of vehicles to be purchased with this allocation as well as the Divisions to which those new vehicles will be assigned are entirely a matter for the Garda Commissioner. However 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.

It may also 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 in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, 94 additional vehicles were purchased by the Garda authorities in March 2020 at a cost of €2.4million and associated fit-out costs of €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 Strength

375. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the current level of staffing in An Garda Síochána in counties Longford and Westmeath by rank and station. [8151/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Garda Commissioner is statutorily responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no responsibility for 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 their optimum use.

The resources provided by Government to An Garda Síochána have reached unprecedented levels, with an allocation for 2020 of €1.88 billion. This level of funding is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff and as a result, An Garda Síochána is a growing organisation.

There are now approximately 14,700 Gardaí nationwide, supported by over 3,000 Garda staff and these numbers are continuing to grow. Taken together, this increase in the number of both Garda members and staff is delivering a significant increase in operational policing hours nationwide.

A detailed breakdown of Garda numbers is available on my Department's website, for the convenience of the public. This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána. Details on the overall number of Garda members assigned to Garda Divisions throughout the State, including the Roscommon/Longford and Westmeath Divisions, are available at the following link: http://justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Workforce.

Details in relation to the number of Garda staff are also available on my Department's website at the following link: http://justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Staff.

Garda Stations

376. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if there are discussions ongoing regarding the potential redistribution of resources and or the full-time reopening of Kilbeggan Garda Station, County Westmeath. [8152/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management and control of An Garda Síochána and for the effective and efficient use of Garda resources. This includes responsibility for allocation of personnel and deployment of resources as well as matters such as the opening hours of Garda stations. As Minister, I have no role in these operational decisions. 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 the number of Gardaí stationed in Kilbeggan Garda Station as of 30 April 2020 was 3. It is also important to be clear that, as is the case in all locations, additional Garda resources are available in the location referred to by the Deputy by way of Garda Divisional and National Units, where required by operational need.

The resources provided to An Garda Síochána have reached unprecedented levels, with an allocation for 2020 of €1.88 billion. This level of funding is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff and as a result, An Garda Síochána is a growing or-

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ganisation. There are now over 14,700 Gardaí nationwide, supported by over 3,000 Garda staff and these numbers are continuing to grow. Taken together, this increase in the number of Garda members and staff is delivering a significant increase in operational policing hours nationwide.

A detailed breakdown of Garda numbers is available on my Department's website. This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána. Information on Garda members is available at the following link:

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_March_2020.xlsx/Files/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_March_2020.xlsx.

Information on Garda staff, the Garda Workforce and other facts and figures are available from the following links:

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Workforce

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/An_Garda_Siochana_facts_and_figures.

Covid-19 Pandemic

377. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of passengers who arrived through airports and seaports to date in May 2020; and the number who filled out a public health passenger locator form. [8177/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The passenger numbers for arrivals into Irish Airports and Seaports for May 2020 set out below have been provided by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport.

It should be noted that there will be a variance in the total passenger numbers versus the number of Public Health Passenger Locator Forms collected. This is due to the different data collection methods used by both Departments and that one Public Health Passenger Locator form may be used by family units/groups who intend to self-isolate together.

The Passenger arrivals data for airports from 1 May 2020 to 22 May 2020 are as follows:

Airport	Passenger Arrivals
Dublin	11,671
Cork	657
Shannon	8
Kerry	55
Donegal	62
Total	12,453

The precise total passenger arrivals into Irish Sea Ports are not available at this time. However the weekly combined totals of arriving and departing passenger were provided by the Irish Maritime Development Office (IMDO) up to 17 May. These are total passenger numbers on the Central, Southern and Continental routes. 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 Central Statistics Office in the coming weeks.

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For the information of the Deputy, an explanation of the route corridors is as follows:

- 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 13 May 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.

Total Passengers departing and arriving at Irish Sea Ports

Date Range	27 April to 3 May	4 May to 10 May	11 May to 17 May
Central	1,433	1,871	2,380
Southern	345	411	788
Continental	455	695	1,133
Total	2,234	2,977	4,301

Border Management Unit Immigration Officers at Dublin Airport, on behalf of the Health Authorities, commenced recording Passenger Locator Forms on 28 April 2020. These contacts were made as part of public health passenger checks under measures related to the Covid-19 pandemic. BMU currently only collect the Passenger Locator forms for Dublin Airport. The Garda National Immigration (GNIB) manage the compliance for the other ports after which the Passenger Locator forms are forwarded to the BMU in Dublin Airport, who also carry out the follow-up calls for those ports.

Dublin Airport:

The table below gives a breakdown of the total expected forms and the number completed during the period 01 May 2020 to 23 May 2020. It should be noted that the number of arrivals differs from the number of expected forms due to the fact that only one form is required per family.

Dublin Airport	01/05/20 - 23/05/20
Total Expected Forms*	10,875
Completed Forms Received	7,799
*only one form completed per family	

Other Ports:

Forms for Other Ports are delivered to BMU at Dublin Airport for follow up action. As mentioned, BMU hold no records of the numbers of arrivals (expected forms). The data below includes numbers of forms received by BMU for follow-up action and of them the number who were exempt and therefore no follow-up action was required.

Dublin Port	28/04/2020 - 21/05/2020
Total Forms Received by BMU	6,044
Exempt	5,171

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Percentage Exempt	86%
Rosslare Port	01/05/2020 - 19/05/2020
Total Forms Received by BMU	1,545
Exempt	1,273
Percentage Exempt	82%
Cork Airport	29/04/2020 - 19/05/2020
Total Forms Received by BMU	391
Exempt	112
Percentage Exempt	29%

Covid-19 Pandemic

378. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the level of compliance of passengers that arrived here in filling out the public health passenger locator form since it was introduced; the number that filled it in; the number that refused; and the number exempt as a total of the number of passengers that have arrived. [8178/20]

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. 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 two days after the person's arrival in the State. The second call is made twelve days after their arrival and where the person has indicated that their stay in Ireland would be for more than twelve days.

It is important to note that the BMU currently only collect the Passenger Locator forms for Dublin Airport. The Garda National Immigration (GNIB) manage the compliance for the other ports after which the Passenger Locator forms are forwarded to the BMU in Dublin Airport, who also carry out the follow-up calls for those ports.

At this time, the only data available that addresses all the questions raised by the Deputy refers to Dublin Airport. However, I have included data on the number of forms received and the percentage exempt for other Ports. We are unable to provide arrivals figures (expected forms) or numbers on those who refused to complete the form for other Ports. That information is being gathered from GNIB and will be forwarded to the Deputy when available.

Dublin Airport:

It should be noted that the number of actual arrivals differs from the number of expected forms due to the fact that only one form is required per family. Therefore the table below gives a breakdown of the total expected forms and of them the number that were completed and the number who refused to complete. The number exempt did complete a form but were exempt from the follow-up action and the requirement to self-isolate. The period covers 28 April 2020

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up to 21 May 2020 inclusive and represents a compliance rate of more than 98%.

Dublin Airport	28/04/2020 - 21/05/2020
Arrivals (Expected Forms)	10,173
Completed Forms Received	7,182
% Forms Compliance	71%
Passenger Declared No Form Provided by Airline	2,779
Language Barrier	26
Refused to Complete Form	186
Percentage Exempt of Completed Forms	2367 (33%)

Other Ports: Forms for Other Ports are delivered to BMU at Dublin Airport for follow up action. As mentioned, BMU hold no records of the numbers of arrivals (expected forms) nor the number who refused to complete the forms for other ports. The data below includes numbers of forms received by BMU for follow-up action and of them the number who were exempt and therefore no follow-up action was required. The returns from other Ports are often inconsistent and therefore we are unable to provide data for Shannon Airport. In addition the period for each Port differs due to the logistics of the forms arriving from each location.

Dublin Port	28/04/2020 - 21/05/2020
Total Forms Received by BMU	6,044
Exempt	5,171
Percentage Exempt	86%
Rosslare Port	01/05/2020 - 19/05/2020
Total Forms Received by BMU	1,545
Exempt	1,273
Percentage Exempt	82%
Cork Airport	29/04/2020 - 19/05/2020
Total Forms Received by BMU	391
Exempt	112
Percentage Exempt	29%

Immigration Status

379. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the residency status in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8179/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I can inform the Deputy that the person concerned has been granted permission to remain on Stamp 1 conditions until 30 September 2020. This decision was conveyed in writing to the person concerned on 13 May 2020.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by email 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 Question process. The Deputy may consider using the email service except in the cases where the response is, in the Deputy's

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view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Visa Applications

380. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of the join family visa applications in the case of persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8180/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): The join family visa applications referred to by the Deputy were submitted to the Visa Office in Abuja, Nigeria on 7 March 2019. They were subsequently received by the Dublin Visa office on 20 January 2020, for further processing, in accordance with the guidelines set out in the Policy Document on Non-EEA Family Reunification.

The Policy Document contains a stated business target that visa applications to join non-EEA national family members should be dealt with within twelve months of receipt of application. However, it should be noted that this is a business target and does not constitute a legal obligation. The business target reflects the detailed and often complex assessment that is required to be carried out in relation to applications for family reunification.

It is not possible to give a definitive date as to when these applications will be finalised. All applications are processed in chronological order, based on date order of receipt. While every effort is made to process applications as soon as possible, processing times will vary having regard to the volume and complexity of applications, the possible need for the Visa Office to investigate, inquire into, or seek further information, and the resources available.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the way the Immigration Services (ISD) of the Department conduct its business. In line with advice issued by Government, HSE and the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET), ISD has implemented a suite of measures to help in reducing the spread of the virus. These measures include the closure of our offices in Burgh Quay and the implementation of remote working for Immigration Services staff in order to comply with social and physical distancing measures. Unfortunately, these measures have led to a reduction in processing capacity. While delays are expected including in the processing of family reunification visa applications, ISD is endeavouring to keep operating to the best of its ability.

Further updates will be provided on the Immigration Service website when available, and I would encourage the Deputy to view the updates and the detailed Frequently Asked Questions document 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 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.

In addition, applicants may themselves e-mail queries directly to visamail@justice.ie.

Immigration Status

381. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the residency status in the case of persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8181/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I can inform the Deputy that, in response to a notification pursuant to the provisions of Section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), written representations have been submitted on behalf of the persons concerned.

These representations, together with all other information and documentation on file, will be fully considered, under Section 3 (6) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) and all other applicable legislation, in advance of a final decision being made.

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.

Immigration Status

382. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the residency status in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8182/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I am informed that both visit visa applications made by the person referred to by the Deputy were refused for reasons outlined in the decision letter at the time of refusal. It was open to the person concerned, to appeal those decisions within two months of the decision date, however no appeals were received in respect of these applications. Currently there are no records of any subsequent visa applications in respect of the person concerned.

It is open to the person concerned to submit a fresh application to my Department at any time. However, in doing so, they should take into account the reasons for refusal of their previous applications and submit supporting documentation to address same. The onus is on all visa applicants to satisfy the Visa Officer as to why a visa should be granted.

As part of the efforts to tackle COVID-19 and to ensure customer safety, my Department took the decision to temporarily cease accepting new visa applications, with the exception of certain priority/emergency applications, effective from close of business 20 March 2020. This situation will continue to be kept under review in consultation with the relevant authorities.

While it is still possible to apply for an Irish visa online in the normal manner, these temporary measures mean that applicants will not be able to complete their application process. However, any application made online will remain valid until such time as restrictions are lifted.

My Department intends to resume accepting applications as soon as safety concerns abate. Applicants are encouraged to check our website regularly for any updates at the following link:

<http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/COVID-19-updates-and-announcement>.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my

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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.

Immigration Status

383. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the residency status in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8187/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I can inform the Deputy that an application for a renewal of permission to remain has been received from the person concerned. This application is under consideration at present and when a decision is made, the person will be notified in writing.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by email 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 Question process. The Deputy may consider using the email service except in the cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Immigration Status

384. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the residency status in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8188/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): This application is currently being considered with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision as expeditiously as possible. If further documentation is required it will be requested from the applicant in due course.

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

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

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by email 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 Question process. The Deputy may consider using the email service except in the cases where the response is, in the Deputy's

view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Naturalisation Applications

385. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the progress to date in the determination of an application for naturalisation in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8189/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I can inform the Deputy that the person concerned submitted an application for a certificate of naturalisation on 27 March 2018. This application is currently being processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision as expeditiously as possible. If further documentation is required it will be requested from the applicant in due course.

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

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

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by email 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 Question process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in the cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Immigration Status

386. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the steps he is taking to ensure provisions are being made for employment permit holders that have been laid off or have had their working hours reduced due to the Covid-19 emergency; and his views on issuing them with a stamp 4. [8205/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I wish to advise the Deputy that information regarding access and entitlement to unemployment payments for those who have been temporarily laid off or have had their working hours reduced, including the new COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment, are a matter for the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

In light of the uncertainties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as a temporary measure between now and 20 July 2020, applications for the following change of permissions, including Stamp 1 Employment permit holders, may be submitted electronically to the Registration Office, Burgh Quay, Dublin (bqregofficeapplications@justice.ie):

From Stamp	To Stamp
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Stamp 1	Stamp 4 (after required period on Employment Permit, Critical Skills Employment Permit or Hosting Agreement)
Stamp 2	Stamp 1A (Trainee Accountant Contract)
Stamp 1G, 2 or 3	Stamp 1 (Employment Permit)
Stamp 1, 2 or 3	Stamp 1G (Spouse of Critical Skills Employment Permit holder)
Stamp 1, 2 or 3	Stamp 4 (Spouse of Irish National)

All required documentation should be scanned and included in the application. All eligibility criteria will continue to apply.

Where a permission has been granted, applicants will still be required to register the change as normal once the Registration Office in Burgh Quay and local Registration Offices reopen. The re-opening of Registration Offices will be kept under review as the situation develops.

I also wish to inform the Deputy that under the measures I announced on 14 May 2020, people residing in the State whose permission is due to expire between 20 May 2020 and 20 July 2020 have been automatically renewed for a period of two months. The renewal of permission is on the same basis as the existing permission and the same conditions attach.

Further updates will be provided on the Immigration Service website when available, and I would encourage the Deputy to view our updates and a detailed Frequently Asked Questions document on the Immigration Service website at:

<http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/COVID-19-updates-and-announcements>

Commencement of Legislation

387. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality when Part 7 of the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 will be operational. [8238/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Charles Flanagan): As the Deputy will be aware, the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 provides a modern statutory framework to support decision-making by adults with capacity difficulties. The Act was signed into law on 30 December 2015 but has not yet been fully commenced. The Act provides for the establishment of new administrative processes and support measures, including the setting up of the Decision Support Service (DSS) within the Mental Health Commission (a body under the Department of Health).

A number of provisions of the 2015 Act were commenced in October 2016 in order to progress the setting up of the Decision Support Service. The Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 (Commencement of Certain Provisions) Order 2016 (S.I. No. 515 of 2016), brought Part 1 (Preliminary and General) and Part 9 (Director of the Decision Support Service) of the Act, other than sections 3, 4 and 7 in Part 1 and sections 96 and 102 and Chapter 3 in Part 9, into operation on 17 October 2016. These provisions were brought into operation in order to enable the recruitment of the Director of the Decision Support Service. Ms Áine Flynn was appointed Director of the DSS on 2 October 2017.

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

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under the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 (Commencement of Certain Provisions) (No. 2) Order 2016 (S.I. No. 517 of 2016), brought some provisions of Part 8 of the Act into operation on 17 October 2016. The provisions commenced in Part 8 were the definition of “Minister” in section 82; the definitions of “code of practice” and “working group” in section 91(1); and section 91(2). The commenced provisions provided for the establishment by the Minister for Health of a multi-disciplinary group to make recommendations to the Director of the DSS in relation to codes of practice on advance healthcare directives. In anticipation of the completion of that process, the Minister for Health commenced the remainder of section 91 on 17 December 2018 (S.I. No. 527 of 2018).

Part 7 of the Act which relates to Enduring Powers of Attorney has not yet been commenced. At present, enduring powers of attorney are created under the Powers of Attorney Act 1996. When Part 7 of the Act is fully commenced, new enduring powers of attorney will be created under the 2015 Act and registered by the Director of the DSS. The implementation of the Act requires that the DSS is fully operational and in a position to offer services including the registration of enduring powers of attorney when the Act is fully commenced. A high-level Steering Group comprising senior officials from the Department of Justice and Equality, the Department of Health, the Mental Health Commission, the Courts Service and the HSE, together with the Director of the DSS, is overseeing the establishment and commissioning of the DSS and this work is ongoing.

The Steering Group has given detailed consideration to the feasibility of commencing the remaining uncommenced provisions of the Act (including Part 7) however, due to the complexity of the Act and the interconnectivity of its provisions, it is not possible to make any further commencement orders until the DSS is operational. The DSS, led by its Director, is working tirelessly to put in place the necessary infra-structure to support the full commencement of the Act. The infrastructure required includes, amongst many other elements, ICT capability for the DSS. These key preparations are being put in place under the oversight of the Steering Group and will allow for commencement orders for the main operative provisions of the 2015 Act to be made when the necessary preparations have been completed to enable the DSS to roll out the new decision-making support options.

The Department of Justice and Equality has sought and received funding, through the Estimates process, over the last three years to assist the DSS in delivering on its mandate. The Department is committed to seek further funding through the Estimates process in 2020 and 2021 but this will of course be subject to available exchequer funding through that process. In the interim, and subject to the funding allocation, the Department, in conjunction with the DSS, the Mental Health Commission and other stakeholders have agreed to an implementation plan which anticipates commencement of DSS services in mid-2022. There are also critical dependencies for the DSS on other organisations, including for example the Courts Service and the HSE, Departments of Health and Justice and Equality, amongst others, which need to be delivered in order to achieve this timeline. The Steering Group comprised of all of these stakeholders is meeting regularly to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the implementation of this project.

Work Permits

388. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to include social work on the general employment permit. [7068/20]

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

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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 system is managed through the operation of the critical skills and ineligible occupations lists which determine employments that are either in high demand or are ineligible for consideration for an employment permit. The 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. Account is also taken of contextual factors such as Brexit and in the current context COVID 19. The views and guidance of the Interdepartmental Group on Economic Migration Policy, chaired by this Department, are also an important part of the decision-making process.

Currently the occupation of social worker is ineligible for an employment permit. In order to have an occupation considered for amendment on the Occupations Lists, there needs to be a clear demonstration that recruitment difficulties are solely due to shortages across the EEA and not to other factors such as salary and/or employment conditions. A detailed evidence-based case based on this data needs to be put forward to the lead policy Government Department for their observations, in this instance the Department of Health, and then submitted to this Department for review and consideration.

Workplace Relations Commission

389. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the procedures pertaining to employment and workplace disputes as a consequence of a number of circumstances (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7348/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) is an independent, statutory body under the aegis of my Department, established on 1st October 2015 under the Workplace Relations Act 2015. The WRC's core services include the inspection of employment rights compliance, the provision of information, adjudicating on complaints under employment protection, equality and industrial relations legislation and the provision of mediation, conciliation, facilitation and advisory services. Similar to many other public bodies, the Covid-19 pandemic has presented a challenge to the WRC in relation to the delivery of its core services.

The WRC publishes regular information updates on its website in relation to its service provision which includes receiving and processing matters pertaining to individual and collective issues. In relation to complaints to the Adjudication Service, where a complaint is submitted electronically, the date of receipt is recorded automatically which enables an Adjudication Officer to note the receipt date in terms of any consideration of statutory timeframes. In instances where hard copy correspondence is lodged, the WRC has in place arrangements for such correspondence to be processed by certain staff who attend the office to date stamp, scan and process it.

Following a recent public consultation process, the WRC has announced how it proposes to process such complaints during the current pandemic. The service delivery options envisage a combination of mediation, written procedure, remote "virtual" hearings. The WRC is planning for the re-introduction of limited face-to-face hearing mediation consistent with the *Roadmap*

for *Re-opening Society and Business* and the *Return to Work Safely Protocol*. It is expected that it will be late July or early August when the WRC will be in a position to start remote virtual hearings.

Covid-19 Pandemic

390. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she has considered the effect large essential retailers opening their drapery and clothes sections will have on smaller retail units that are not permitted to open until 8 June 2020 at the earliest; if certain sized retailers can apply to open earlier than this date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7393/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As Chair of the Retail Consultation Forum, I am aware that this is a challenging time for retailers across Ireland - large and small. It is a particularly difficult time for retailers who have had to close their doors in the interest of public health and adherence to the public health guidelines.

The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business published on Friday 1st May sets out five stages for modifying 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 the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

Large supermarkets have been able to remain open under the measures published on the 27th March which included the updated list of essential retail outlets <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/625292-updated-list-of-essential-retail-outlets-27th-march-2020/>. On 15 May, 2020 the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business from Monday May 18, 2020. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of essential retail outlets and other facilities that can therefore reopen under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website <https://www.gov.ie/en/news/58bc8b-taoiseach-announces-roadmap-for-reopening-society-and-business-and-u/>

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.

Under the risk based approach deployed in the Roadmap, under Phase 2 (from June 8th) small retail outlets can reopen with a small number of staff on the basis that the retailer can control the number of individuals that staff and customers interact with at any one time. These measures will only come into place 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.

As Chairperson of the Retail Consultation Forum I have previously communicated with the major grocery multiples that where retail outlets and stores have discrete drapery and clothing sections or floors, these should close in line with the Government's announcements on non-essential retail. I understand some essential retailers such as large supermarkets may carry products which are incidental to their primary retail function.

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The advice for individuals is still to stay at home as much as possible. During Phase 1, it is intended that customers should restrict visits to such stores for essential supplies. All retailers are encouraged to continue to provide on-line services where that is possible and appropriate to minimise footfall. All of these retail outlets must implement physical distancing measures and measures set out in the National Return to Work Safely Protocol.

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.

It is imperative that all businesses must adhere to physical distancing requirements and the latest public health guidance at all times.

A wide range of financial supports and guidance has been made available by my Department and wider Government to help businesses impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Full details of all supports and guidance is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>

It is important to check <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/c36c85-covid-19-coronavirus/> for the latest information, public health advice and guidelines from Government in relation to Covid-19.

Covid-19 Pandemic

391. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the guidance and advice she will provide to gym operators for reopening; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7492/20]

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](https://www.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. The Roadmap provides that gyms, dance studios and sports clubs can reopen in Phase 5, but only where regular and

effective cleaning can be carried out and social distancing can be maintained. Phase 5 is scheduled to start on 10th August.

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 is 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 grant is equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

If a company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority.

All information including the application form are available on the appropriate local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

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

392. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if podiatrists are permitted to resume non-emergency services under phase 1 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. [7551/20]

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://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 is 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-

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ployees and customers. The grant is equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

If a company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority.

All information including the application form will be available on your local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

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

393. Deputy Marian Harkin asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when retail units without street level entry in shopping centres will be permitted to open in view of the fact that many in enclosed shopping centres have remained open during the Covid-19 crisis, due to the fact that many retailers in shopping centres are regarded as essential retail outlets. [7869/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As Chair of the Retail Consultation Forum, I am aware that this is a challenging time for retailers across Ireland - large and small. It is a particularly difficult time for retailers who have had to close their doors in the interest of public health and adherence to the public health guidelines.

The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business published on Friday 1st May sets out five stages for modifying 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 the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May, 2020 the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business from Monday May 18, 2020. This is in line with

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advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of essential retail outlets and other facilities that can therefore reopen under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website <https://www.gov.ie/en/news/58bc8b-taoiseach-announces-roadmap-for-reopening-society-and-business-and-u/>

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. It is imperative that all businesses must adhere to physical distancing requirements and the latest public health guidance at all times.

A wide range of financial supports and guidance has been made available by my Department and wider Government to help businesses impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Full details of all supports and guidance is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>

It is important to check <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/c36c85-covid-19-coronavirus/> for the latest information, public health advice and guidelines from Government in relation to Covid-19.

Health and Safety Authority

394. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of health and safety officers employed nationwide; the locations; if additional staff are being recruited or being brought in to support inspections; her plans to support this important element in returning to work in view of the challenges for persons returning to work in terms of health and safety; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8261/20]

449. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the current whole-time equivalent staffing level within the Health and Safety Authority of trained, qualified health and safety inspectors, excluding corporate and support staff and excluding those on career breaks, long-term sick leave, maternity and other long-term leave; the geographical spread of same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7921/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take questions Nos. 394 and 449 together.

The Health and Safety Authority (HSA) has a full staff complement of 182 (176.2 whole time equivalents) which is made up of staff in administration and inspector grades. The inspector grades are comprised of Grade I (senior inspectors) as well as Grade II and Grade III

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inspectors. The Health and Safety Authority has 109 inspectors (104.5 whole-time equivalents) in the grade. It is important to note that not all of these inspectors are involved in field inspection duties. Inspectors operate across a large mandate including occupational health and safety, market surveillance of products and chemicals. The HSA has 67 field inspectors who have been assigned to inspect on foot of the Return to Work Safely Protocol.

Inspectors of the Health and Safety Authority operate on a regional basis as follows:

Dublin South City & County, Kildare and Wicklow; North Western Unit - Galway, Mayo, Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Longford, Monaghan, Roscommon and Sligo; Dublin North City & County, Louth, Meath; South West Unit - Clare, Limerick, Cork City & County, and Kerry; Kilkenny, Waterford, Wexford, Tipperary, Carlow, Laois, Offaly and Westmeath.

The Health and Safety Authority has regional offices in Waterford, Athlone, Limerick, Cork, Kilkenny, Galway and Sligo with its head office in Dublin.

While the Authority is overseeing compliance with the Protocol, it has been recognised that given the nature of COVID-19, a cross Government inspection and compliance approach is required. To this end, a range of other inspection bodies will be mobilised by Government to also inspect and check compliance with the Protocol. 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 responsibilities. Compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol will become part of their normal inspection regime. It will start shortly with around 200 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, such as WRC inspectors, in line with the Government Roadmap.

The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has given his commitment that agriculture inspectors working within his Department will work with the Health and Safety Authority on ensuring the implementation of the Protocol in workplaces.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

395. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the differences between the current credit guarantee scheme and new €2 billion scheme proposed; and the differences in terms, conditions and those that may access the scheme. [7046/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government on 2nd 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.

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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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

396. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the reason there has not been any approved facility arising from Covid-19 submitted to SBCI from financial providers under the credit guarantee scheme. [7047/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government on 2nd 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 pe-

riods 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 existing 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.

There have not been any approved facilities arising from Covid-19 submitted to SBCI from financial providers under the existing Credit Guarantee Scheme. While discussions between the financial providers and their customers are confidential in nature, it is possible that borrowers may be availing of other Government schemes which are available or are awaiting further information on the new Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme.

Covid-19 Pandemic

397. Deputy Paul Donnelly asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the guidance to date on PPE and in terms of financing supports for those in the hairdressing industry. [7063/20]

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://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>.

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General guidance on the use of PPE is set out on page 16 and 17 of the National Return to Work Safely Protocol. In the context of COVID-19 risk, employers should check the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) website regularly for updates regarding use of recommended PPE. <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/>

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 met recently with members of the hairdressing and beauty industry via teleconference and understand that preparatory work is being undertaken by the hairdressing sector and others in developing guidelines and safety protocols, with reference to the Government's Return to Work Safely Protocol. I requested that, where sectors are developing protocols or guides, they need to work together to align this work. For example, barbers' representative bodies should collaborate with hairdressers representative bodies on a single aligned protocol for their sector. I am keen to support sectors on their safe reopening on this aligned and collaborative basis and should the hairdressing sector wish to send me details of their sectoral protocol, I will be happy to convey these to the Minister for Health.

You should also note that, 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 re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant is 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 grant is equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000. If a company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority. All information including the application form is available on the appropriate local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

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

398. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when the permission given for shopping centres to open fully will include phone, clothes, book shops, shops selling beauty products and so on; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7091/20]

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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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>

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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://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

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If a company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority. All information including the application form are available on the appropriate local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

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

399. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the supports that will put in place to help businesses reopen; and the additional measures that will be put in place to help with the cost of wages and changes that businesses will need to make before they can be reopened. [7092/20]

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.

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 Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), 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

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see <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

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.

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.

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.

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The Fund will provide financial assistance in the form of repayable advances of up to a maximum of €800,000 per company.

Sustaining Enterprise Fund – Small Enterprise: 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.

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.

Restart Grant is a new €250m Restart Grant providing direct grant aid to micro and small businesses, application forms are now available online on all local authority websites. The grant is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers.

To qualify for the Restart Grant, a business must

- have a turnover of less than €5m and have 50 or less employees.
- have suffered a projected 25%+ loss in revenue from 1st April 2020 to 30th June 2020.
- commit to remain open or to reopen if it was closed. The business must also declare the intention to retain employees that are benefitting from the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS).

In addition to these new supports, there are a range of other supports to assist companies to start to scale, innovate, remain competitive, diversify into new markets and 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

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.

Together with the suite of Covid-19 supports The Return to Work Safely Protocol has been 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 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.

It is important to check <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/c36c85-covid-19-coronavirus/> for the latest information, public health advice and guidelines from Government in relation to Covid-19.

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. 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

400. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when physical therapists, reflexologists, homeopaths and yoga instructors can return to work;

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if guidance has been sought from NPHEt for such businesses; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7094/20]

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 (NPHEt). 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. 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 re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant is 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 grant is equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

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If a company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority.

All information including the application form are available on the appropriate local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

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

401. Deputy Brendan Griffin asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if additional measures will be put in place to support the hairdressing industry (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7096/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, Government has worked to ensure that a suite of supports is in place to help businesses negatively impacted by both the outbreak and the measures introduced to mitigate the spread of the contagion. I am conscious that, for practical reasons, the impact on some businesses has been particularly severe. On Wednesday, 20 May I had a meeting via conference call with representatives of the hair and beauty and barber industry to discuss the implications of Covid-19 for their businesses.

With specific regard to queries around cashflow and working capital, the SBCI Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme opened for eligibility applications on 23 March and 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. 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.

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.

Funding under this scheme is offered at favourable terms and at a lower interest rate than

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other similar SME lending available in the market. The maximum interest rate under the scheme is 4% and loans of up to €500,000 are available unsecured. Applicants may also be able to avail of a three-month interest-only payment period (depending on your lender's assessment of your application).

There are significant advantages to operating these loan guarantee schemes through participating financial providers. This allows the Government to leverage existing commercial lending infrastructure to provide an efficient mechanism for making competitive lending products available to Covid-19-impacted businesses. The guarantee structure ensures that eligible applicants to the schemes represents a reduced risk to the participating lender, which in turn ensures access to appropriate financing for more businesses.

However, the operation of these loan schemes through the financial providers also means that interest is a feature of the loans, as some interest must be charged by the lenders to cover overheads and capital costs if they are to continue to work with Government.

For micro-enterprises (businesses with fewer than 10 employees), the Covid-19 Loan, available from Microfinance Ireland (MFI), has been introduced as a support to help businesses affected by the Covid-19 crisis to access funding.

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-month 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 micro-enterprises where the application is made through the network of Local Enterprise Offices around the country, or where referred by a bank or Local Development Committee. An interest rate of 5.5% is applied to loans sought directly through MFI.

In terms of new supports, on 2 May, I announced a €2billion Credit Guarantee Scheme to support lending to SMEs for terms ranging from three months to six years. Loans under the scheme will be offered at below market interest rates, and the scheme will support a variety of credit facilities.

A number of additional measures to aid the economy as the Covid-19 restrictions start to be lifted were also outlined on 2 May. These included:

- 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;
- 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 to provide full services to the public.

I have also recently announced a new €250m Restart Fund, which will be a critically important tool in supporting small businesses as they begin to reopen. This fund will provide up to €10,000 to micro and small businesses and will be implemented either through a rebate or waiver scheme based on rates payment for 2019, and will be targeted more widely at micro and small enterprises that have suffered large falls in revenue as a result of the crisis. These

recently announced supports will help businesses affected by Covid-19 to address a range of credit needs.

Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement

402. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the estimated full-year cost if the budget for the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement increased by 25%; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7102/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): A funding allocation of €6.057 million was provided for the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement (ODCE) for 2019. This represented an increase of approximately 20% on the 2018 allocation and remains unchanged for 2020. The estimated full year cost if the 2020 funding allocation for the ODCE increased by 25%, (€1.514 million), would be €7.571 million.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

403. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will work with the Minister for Health to formulate an action plan to safeguard the future of the dental profession and introduce measures (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7150/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government is acutely aware of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic across all segments of society and business. 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 re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant is 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 grant is 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 directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority.

All information including the application form is available on the appropriate local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

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As the Deputy is aware, policy responsibility for the dental profession rests with my colleague, the Minister for Health, Simon Harris T.D. and elements of the measures proposed by the Deputy fall within the remits of other Government colleagues, namely the Minister for Finance, Pascal Donohoe T.D. and the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Regina Doherty T.D. I can assure the Deputy that I am working closely with all colleagues across Government 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 in line with public health advice.

Covid-19 Pandemic

404. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the phase personal training falls under regarding reopening. [7157/20]

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://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

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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 re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant is 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 grant is equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

If a company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority.

All information including the application form is available on the appropriate local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

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.

Job Losses

405. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the support other than statutory redundancy that can be provided to workers of a company (details supplied) that has gone into liquidation; if she will invite the company to reconsider its approach and treat its staff fairly; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7200/20]

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.

As the Deputy will 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

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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.

Health and Safety Authority

406. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to hire new HSA inspectors to investigate complaints and enforce social distancing requirements in the workplace; the number of inspectors she plans to hire; when she expects these to be fully trained and available; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7233/20]

407. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to allocate additional resources to the HSA to regulate and enforce social distancing requirements as set out in the return to work protocols; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7234/20]

415. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of inspectors available to carry out enforcement of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7330/20]

416. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if additional inspectors will be recruited or seconded into the HSA to carry out inspections in the workplace to police compliance with the HSA guidelines on companies reopening during the Covid-19 emergency. [7331/20]

429. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she plans to redeploy staff from other Departments to the Health and Safety Authority to assist with

Covid-19 inspections; if so, the number; the Departments from which; when these staff will be redeployed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7549/20]

463. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of new inspectors that will be recruited or seconded to the Health and Safety Authority; and the timeline for same. [8023/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 406, 407, 415, 416, 429 and 463 together.

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. The 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 is operating in parallel with existing workplace health and safety statutory requirements.

The Health and Safety Authority is the lead Agency in relation to oversight and compliance with the Protocol. It will ensure compliance with the Protocol through a range of measures including advice, guidance, inspection and enforcement action as appropriate and as provided for in the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005.

The HSA is deploying all of its available field inspectors across all sectors to carry out both spot checks and other inspections to check compliance with the Protocol. However, the Government will ensure that 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.

While details of these additional resource are currently being finalised, the numbers working with the HSA will be in the hundreds, from across the system. These will be specialist officials who already have sectoral business inspection responsibilities. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has given a commitment that inspectors from his Department will work with the HSA to ensure the implementation of the Protocol in workplaces. Compliance with the COVID-19 Return to Work Safely Protocol will become part of the normal inspection regime. It will start shortly with around 200 officials 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. The details are being finalised at present. The HSA will carry a mix of unannounced inspections, along with providing advice and information through the HSA's 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.

However, even with the support of resources from other Government Departments, the inspectorate cannot be expected to go into every business in the country. That would be entirely unrealistic and unachievable. Therefore, In the first instance, and in line with what is set out in the Protocol, employers and workers have a responsibility to actively and jointly take responsibility for applying the clear and mandatory measures to protect the health and safety of all concerned.

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,

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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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

408. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the provisions she plans to put in place to protect workers who make complaints to the HSA over breaches of Covid-19 guidelines in their place of work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7236/20]

417. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will establish a confidential phone line for employees to make complaints in respect of potential breaches by employers of health and safety measures and protocols aimed at preventing the spread of Covid-19. [7332/20]

465. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the complaints process for the reporting and enforcement of breaches to the Return to Work Safely Protocol. [8059/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 408, 417 and 465 together.

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. The 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 is operating in parallel with existing workplace health and safety statutory requirements.

The Health and Safety Authority is the lead Agency in relation to oversight and compliance with the Protocol. It will ensure compliance with the Protocol through a range of measures including advice, guidance, inspection and enforcement action as appropriate and as provided for in the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005.

With regard to the establishment of 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 Protocol. The WCU can be contacted by phone at 1890 289 389 or (01) 6147000 or at any time by email at wcu@hsa.ie, complaints to the WCU are managed on a completely confidential basis.

The resources of the WCU have been supplemented by the transfer of staff members from my Department to assist with the expected increased demand on the WCU as the number of workplaces reopening will increase over coming weeks.

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.

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I would, however, also highlight the fact that concerns a worker might have around adherence to the Protocol can, and should be, brought to the attention of the lead COVID-19 worker representative. The Protocol emphasises that collaboration, communication and exchange of information between employers and employees is vital and both employer and employee have a role to play and responsibilities towards each other.

Health and Safety Inspections

409. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of workplace inspections carried out by the HSA in January and February 2020. [7258/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Health and Safety Authority works to an annual Programme of Work and generally targets inspection activities at high risk sectors such as the construction and farming sectors.

The total number of inspections carried out by the Health and Safety Authority in January 2020 was 779 and in February 2020 there were 901 inspections.

Health and Safety Inspections

410. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation further to Covid Query No. 5.546, the number of the 415 inspections carried out since March 2020 that were of workplaces in County Tipperary; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7259/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): In relation to PQ5546 asked by the Deputy for answer on the 11th of May. This PQ referenced a total of 415 inspections and investigations carried out by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) since the beginning of March to the date of that request.

Of the 415 inspections and investigations carried out by the Health and Safety Authority during this time, 217 resulted in reports of inspection being issued and 20 resulted in enforcement notices. The inspections were focused on core occupational safety and health issues. Since the beginning of March, 9 inspections have been undertaken which related to workplaces in Co. Tipperary.

On 18 May 2020, in line with Phase 1 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, the HSA launched a national programme of inspections to check compliance with the national Return to Work Safely Protocol. Over 500 onsite inspections have been undertaken by the Authority (as of Friday 22nd May) across a range of industry sectors. As all of these inspections may not yet be recorded on the HSA's system, it is possible that a further number of these inspections would have involved workplaces in Co. Tipperary.

The HSA has been deploying all of its available field inspectors across all sectors to carry out both spot checks and other inspections to check compliance with the national Return to Work Safely Protocol.

While the Authority is overseeing compliance with the Protocol, it has been recognised that given the nature of COVID-19, a cross Government inspection and compliance approach is required. To this end, a range of other inspection bodies will be mobilised by Government to also inspect and check compliance with the Protocol. The numbers of additional resources

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working with the HSA will be in the hundreds, from across the system. These will be specialist officials who already have sectoral business inspection responsibilities. Compliance with the Covid Return to Work Safely Protocol will become part of their normal inspection regime. It will start shortly with around 200 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, such as WRC inspectors, in line with the Government Roadmap.

The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has given his commitment that agriculture inspectors working within his Department will work with the Health and Safety Authority on ensuring the implementation of the Protocol in workplaces.

Commercial Property

411. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation further to her written reply to the statement by this Deputy in Dáil Éireann on commercial landlords, if she has received a response from the Attorney General on the protection of businesses that are unable to pay commercial rents; if she has had an opportunity to consider this issue further; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7262/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Commercial leases are primarily a contractual matter for the parties involved. However, as the Deputy rightly notes, I wrote to the Attorney General seeking his views on whether a provision similar to that introduced in the UK, essentially banning evictions during the crisis, could be made in law here in Ireland. I also asked him to consider if legislation could provide for a moratorium for businesses being required to pay rent for a premises, or portion of a premises, that it cannot use due to it adhering to restrictions.

I received a response on 13th May 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.

I have also 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 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 business that have been negatively impacted by Covid-19. These included:

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- A €10,000 restart grant for micro and small businesses based on a rates waiver / rebate from 2019 (see further information below);
- 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.

The issue of supporting fixed costs, including commercial rents, was very much to the fore of our minds when the Government recently introduced the Restart Grant which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with re-opening and re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. 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.

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, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

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

412. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when small independent sports retailers may reopen their premises in line with public health guidance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7311/20]

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

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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 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 re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant is 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 grant is equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

If a company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority.

All information including the application form are available on the appropriate local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

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

413. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the plans she has put in place for the reopening of hairdressing salons and barber shops throughout the country in view of the fact they will only be able to open at a dramatically reduced capacity and that the wage subsidy scheme is due to expire on 16 June 2020, but these businesses are not expected to be reopened until 20 July 2020; if a fit-for-purpose scheme to help cash flow rather than the complicated schemes through the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland will be put in place; if she will examine models internationally with a high rate of approval for cash flow and assistance during the months after reopening; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7313/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, Government has worked to ensure that a suite of supports is in place to help businesses negatively impacted by both the outbreak and the measures introduced to mitigate the spread of the contagion. I am conscious that, for practical reasons, the impact on some businesses has been particularly severe. On Wednesday, 20 May I had a meeting via conference call with representatives of the hair and beauty and barber industry to discuss the implications of Covid-19 for their businesses.

With specific regard to queries around cashflow and working capital, the SBCI Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme opened for eligibility applications on 23 March and 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. 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.

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.

I would stress that the application process for these SBCI schemes is not onerous. Businesses need only confirm their eligibility for the scheme by application through the SBCI website. After a successful application, they will be issued an eligibility reference number, which they can use to make an application for a loan from one of the participating finance providers.

As of 21 May, of the 2,591 applicants for eligibility under the scheme, only 13 had so far been found to be ineligible. The SBCI has also put in place a helpdesk that responds to any queries arising around the application process.

Funding under this scheme is offered at favourable terms and at a lower interest rate than other similar SME lending available in the market. The maximum interest rate under the scheme

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is 4% and loans of up to €500,000 are available unsecured. Applicants may also be able to avail of a three-month interest-only payment period (depending on your lender's assessment of your application).

For micro-enterprises (businesses with fewer than 10 employees), the Covid-19 Loan, available from Microfinance Ireland (MFI), has been introduced as a support to help businesses affected by the Covid-19 crisis to access funding.

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-month 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 micro-enterprises where the application is made through the network of Local Enterprise Offices around the country, or where referred by a bank or Local Development Committee. An interest rate of 5.5% is applied to loans sought directly through MFI.

In terms of new supports, on 2 May, I announced a €2bn Credit Guarantee Scheme to support lending to SMEs for terms ranging from three months to six years. Loans under the scheme will be offered at below market interest rates.

Across the EU, different member states have prioritised different features of their respective liquidity supports to businesses, and so a direct comparison may not be appropriate. However, from the data available, Ireland's loan guarantee schemes appear to be in line with many countries: they cover 80% of the loan value, at commercial or slightly lower rates.

I have also recently announced a new €250m Restart Fund, which will be a critically important tool in supporting small businesses as they begin to reopen. This fund will provide up to €10,000 to micro and small businesses and will be implemented either through a rebate or waiver scheme based on rates payment for 2019, and will be targeted more widely at micro and small enterprises that have suffered large falls in revenue as a result of the crisis.

Covid-19 Pandemic

414. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will address a matter regarding the hairdressing and beauty industry (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7327/20]

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

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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.

I met recently with members of the hairdressing and beauty industry via teleconference and understand that preparatory work is being undertaken by the hairdressing sector and others in developing guidelines and safety protocols, with reference to the Government's Return to Work Safely Protocol. I requested that, where sectors are developing protocols or guides, they need to work together to align this work. For example, barbers' representative bodies should collaborate with hairdressers representative bodies on a single aligned protocol for their sector.

I am keen to support sectors on their safe reopening on this aligned and collaborative basis and should the hairdressing sector wish to send me details of their sectoral protocol, I will be happy to convey these to the Minister for Health.

You should also note that, 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 re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant is 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 grant is equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

If a company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority. All information including the application form is available on the appropriate

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local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

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.

Questions Nos. 415 and 416 answered with Question No. 406.

Question No. 417 answered with Question No. 408.

Covid-19 Pandemic

418. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if further details will be published regarding the companies that can open and when they are in line with the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. [7338/20]

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-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://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 re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant is 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 grant is equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

If a company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority.

All information including the application form will be available on the appropriate local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

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

419. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the

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details of the announced business restart fund and the person or body to apply to; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7368/20]

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 re-employing 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 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 re-employ 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 Supports

420. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if the qualifying criteria will be reconsidered for the Covid-19 restart grant for small businesses (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7441/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The new €250m Restart Grant providing direct grant aid to micro and small businesses is available online on all local authority websites since Friday 22nd May. Eligible businesses who have remained open, or that reopened under phase 1 on 18th May or that are due to reopen in Phase 2 on 8th June under the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business to ease the COVID-19 restrictions are encouraged to apply now for the Restart Grant. These applications

will be prioritised for payment by the local authorities.

The Restart Grant is aimed at helping micro and small businesses with the costs associated with reopening and re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures.

I understand the concerns relating to business that do not operate from commercial premises.

However, tradespersons and service providers that operate on a mobile basis or that could continue to work remotely have been better placed to continue to trade and many do not have the same levels of ongoing overheads or reopening costs that a fixed premises business will have. Within the funding available, the priority has been to support those who have suffered most, including closure of the business, but who will still have incurred ongoing costs.

The eligibility criteria will be subject to ongoing review and we will continue to take on board issues as they arise.

Covid-19 Pandemic

421. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when guidance will be issued to hairdressers and barbers regarding the steps they will need to take to protect customers and staff before they return to work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7453/20]

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

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further guidance on the Protocol, the HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

I met recently with members of the hairdressing and beauty industry via teleconference and understand that preparatory work is being undertaken by the hairdressing sector and others in developing guidelines and safety protocols, with reference to the Government's Return to Work Safely Protocol. I requested that, where sectors are developing protocols or guides, they need to work together to align this work. For example, barbers' representative bodies should collaborate with hairdressers representative bodies on a single aligned protocol for their sector. I am keen to support sectors on their safe reopening on this aligned and collaborative basis and should the hairdressing sector wish to send me details of their sectoral protocol, I will be happy to convey these to the Minister for Health.

You should also note that, 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 re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant is 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 grant is equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000. If a company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority. All information including the application form is available on the appropriate local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

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.

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Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

422. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of applications received for the Covid-19 working capital loan scheme by the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland to date; the number approved for funding; the number of companies that received loans; the value of the loans issued to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7464/20]

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. 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.

Loans under this scheme are offered with a maximum interest rate of 4%. This represents a significant saving compared to other similar lending on the market for SMEs. Furthermore, this loan product provides for unsecured loans of up to €500,000. Such a feature would not typically be available through normal bank loan products to SMEs, however, due to the guarantee structure in place for the Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme it was feasible to provide for collateral-free loans and this provides for a significant reassurance for many businesses.

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.

As at 18 May, a total of 2,305 candidates have been deemed eligible to apply under the scheme at bank level. Of those, 248 have progressed to sanction at bank level to a total value of €37,811,000 worth of loan approvals.

Covid-19 Pandemic

423. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if sector-specific task forces made up of key stakeholders will be considered to advise on the measures needed to be introduced to facilitate the safe opening of their business; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7476/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The national Return to Work Safely Protocol, is the result of a collaborative effort by the Health & Safety Authority (HSA), the Health Services Executive (HSE), Department of Business Enterprise and Innovation and the Department of Health. It is designed to help employers and workers in all sectors to put measures in place that will prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. It is a stand-alone Protocol that has also been designed to enable the introduction of further specific measures for particular sectors or workplaces. It is a living document which will change to reflect public health advice.

The Protocol was developed following discussion and agreement at the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF), which is the forum for high level dialogue between Government,

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Union and Employer representatives on matters of strategic national importance. The work has been overseen by the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. Meetings of LEEF took place on 9 April and 24 April 2020. In addition to these Plenary meetings, a sub-group dealing specifically with development of the Protocol met on numerous occasions and there were also ongoing bilateral engagements between officials and the members of LEEF as the Protocol was being drafted and signed-off by all parties.

A high-level consultative stakeholder forum, under the aegis of LEEF, has now been established to oversee the implementation of the Protocol as the economy opens up in line with the Government's Roadmap. As well as representatives from ITCU and Ibec, the forum includes membership from the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), the Health Services Executive (HSE), the Departments of Health; Agriculture Food and the Marine; Business, Enterprise and Innovation, and the Department of the Taoiseach. The first meeting of the Forum was on Friday the 22 of May.

Separately, in addition to the National Return to Work Safely Protocol, the Health and Safety Authority has now produced associated templates and checklists which have been prepared to help employers, business owners and managers to get their business up and running again and to also inform workers preventing the spread of Covid-19 in the workplace (see www.HSA.ie)

The National Standards Authority of Ireland has published guidance documents in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic including a COVID-19 Workplace Protection and Improvement Guide and a COVID-19 Retail Protection and Improvement Guide which are available on the NSAI website (see www.nsai.ie)

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

424. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will review the criteria required in order to be eligible for the restart grant for small businesses in view of the fact that it excludes many that do not operate from a commercial property; if her attention has been drawn to the fact that many of these small businesses that cannot avail of the restart grant will have severe difficulty in restarting their businesses; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7484/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The application form for the new €250m Restart Grant providing direct grant aid to micro and small businesses is now available online on all local authority websites since Friday 22nd May. Eligible businesses who have remained open, or that reopened under phase 1 on 18th May or that are due to reopen in Phase 2 on 8th June under the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business to ease the COVID-19 restrictions are encouraged to apply now for the Restart Grant. These applications will be prioritised for payment by the local authorities.

The Restart Grant is aimed at helping micro and small businesses with the costs associated with reopening and re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures.

I understand the concerns relating to business that do not operate from commercial premises.

However, some tradespersons and service providers that operate on a mobile basis or that could continue to work remotely have been better placed to continue to trade and many don't have the same levels of losses, of ongoing overheads or reopening costs that a fixed premises business will have. Within the funding available, the priority has been to support those who have suffered most, including closure of the business, but who will still have incurred ongoing

costs.

We are also focussed on businesses that have continued to employ people, with the aid of the Temporary Wage Support Scheme, so that those jobs will be retained as soon as the business re-opens.

The eligibility criteria will be subject to ongoing review and we will continue to take on board issues as they arise.

Industrial Relations

425. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will oblige those employers in receipt of Covid-19 business supports to respect Labour Court recommendations relating to trade union recognition and require the full participation of those same employers in the industrial relations infrastructure of the State; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7487/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Ireland's system of Industrial Relations is based in voluntarism. While the right of workers to form associations and join a trade union is enshrined in Article 40 of the Irish Constitution, under Irish law there is no obligation on employers to recognise any union for the purposes of collective bargaining.

However, it has been the consistent policy of successive Irish Governments to promote collective bargaining through legislation.

The Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2015 which came into effect in August 2015 provides an improved framework in this area for employees' right to engage in collective bargaining. The 2015 Act provides a clear and balanced mechanism by which the fairness of the employment conditions of workers can be assessed where collective bargaining does not take place. The Act ensures that such workers, aided by a trade union, can advance claims about remuneration and conditions of employment and have these determined by the Labour Court.

In addition to the improved framework introduced in the 2015 Act, the statutory Code of Practice on Victimisation was enhanced in October 2015 to include an explicit prohibition on the use by employers of inducements (financial or otherwise) designed specifically to have staff forego collective representation by a trade union.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

426. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to amend the current Covid-19 business supports to ensure direct, targeted and low-cost finance to micro and small businesses; if she has considered a tapered scheme of support for businesses relating to company size; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7490/20]

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. There are currently a number of loan guarantee schemes in place which support the working capital needs of micro and small businesses.

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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, including through any mechanisms allowable through the EU's state aid framework.

Microfinance Ireland (MFI) was introduced as a support to microenterprises to help them address funding needs and provides loans to microenterprises that do not meet the conventional risk criteria of banks. These loans are available to 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.

MFI provides vital support to microenterprises by filling the lending gap in the market by lending to businesses that cannot obtain loans from other commercial lenders. Where typical MFI loans are available at an interest rate of 6.8-7.8%, Covid-19 loans are available at an interest rate of 4.5% where the application is made through the network of Local Enterprise Offices around the country, or where referred by a bank or Local Development Committee. Where an application is made directly to MFI, the interest rate is 5.5%. These loans also include an option for a moratorium on interest and repayments for the first six months.

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 Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI). It currently makes available a fund of up to €200m to eligible businesses that are exposed to impacts arising from the outbreak of Covid-19, to enable those businesses to innovate, change or adapt in response to the current business environment.

Loans under this scheme are easier to access and offered at favourable terms when compared with other similar loans in the market, for example the maximum interest rate under the scheme is 4% and loans of up to €500,000 are available unsecured. Applicants may also be able to avail of a three-month interest-only payment period (depending on your lender's assessment of your application).

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.

The Future Growth Loan Scheme makes available up to €300 million of long-term loans and is operated by the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) through participating lenders. This scheme makes funding available for terms of 8-10 years, which is longer than is typically available in the Irish SME lending market due to the risks associated with longer-term loans. As with the Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme, loans of up to €500,000 are available unsecured. Uptake for the scheme has been strong and the initial funding has been almost fully subscribed.

On 8 April 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.

On 2 May, I 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 as they seek access to credit facilities to assist a return to a more regular trading environment.

Implementation of this scheme will require primary legislation, the drafting of which has

been approved by Government, and my officials are already working urgently with the Office of the Parliamentary counsel on this drafting work.

I have also recently announced a new €250m Restart Fund, which will be a critically important tool in supporting small businesses as they begin to reopen.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

427. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the detailed proposals in terms of funding, cash flow and capital resources available for the hotel sector in regard to which business for 2020 has been decimated due to the Covid-19 crisis; the supports in place for companies whose turnover will be dramatically reduced but will have ongoing commitments in terms of bank repayments and overheads; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7514/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Since the onset of the Covid-19 crisis, Government has worked to ensure that appropriate supports are in place for businesses in sectors that have been exposed to negative impacts arising as a result of the outbreak and the measures put in place to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 in Ireland. I understand that some businesses, such as those operating in the hospitality sector, have been particularly affected by this crisis.

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. 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.

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. On 8, 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.

For micro-enterprises in the hospitality sector, the Covid-19 Loan, available from Microfinance Ireland (MFI), has been introduced as a support to microenterprises to help them access funding arising from 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-month 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 micro-enterprises where the application is made through the network of Local Enterprise Offices around the country, or where referred by a bank or Local Development Committees. An interest rate of 5.5% is applied to loans sought directly through MFI.

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In terms of new supports, on 2 May, I announced a €2billion Credit Guarantee Scheme to support lending to SMEs for terms ranging from three months to six years. Loans under the scheme will be offered at below market interest rates.

I also recently announced a new €250m Restart Fund, which will be a critically important tool in supporting small businesses as they begin to reopen.

This has been a period of unforeseeable disruption to businesses around the country, and I am conscious that there have been significant impacts on otherwise viable businesses. I would encourage businesses that have been negatively impacted as a result Covid-19 to take advantage of these supports wherever appropriate.

Covid-19 Pandemic

428. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when weddings can be allowed to be held; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7542/20]

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.

Family - type social gatherings, such as small and large weddings, are listed among the Community Health Measures in the Roadmap on which restrictions are due to be lifted in Phases 4 and 5. Any decisions taken by Government to that effect will be guided by the public health advice available 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

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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 re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant is 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 grant is equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

If a company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority.

All information including the application form is available on the appropriate local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

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.

Question No. 429 answered with Question No. 406.

Health and Safety Authority

430. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the average training time for a new HSA inspector; her plans to expedite this process in view of

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Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7559/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Health and Safety Authority has a well-established Inspector Development Programme in place, whereby newly appointed inspectors complete a training programme which consists of 12 distinct modules. This development programme is normally delivered over a 6 month period and is augmented by a programme of accompanied inspections whereby the trainee shadows an experienced inspector.

The additional resources to be provided for the Health and Safety Authority in respect of compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol will be specialist officials who already have sectoral business inspection responsibilities and training. In this regard, they will be able to work with the Health and Safety Authority to ensure the implementation of the Protocol in workplaces. Compliance with the COVID-19 Return to Work Safely Protocol will become part of the normal inspection regime.

Covid-19 Pandemic

431. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when she will permit the return of tilers to work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7564/20]

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

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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 re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant is 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 grant is equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

If a company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority.

All information including the application form is available on the appropriate local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

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.

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432. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will review instances of large supermarkets selling clothes at discount prices while small clothes shops in town centres remain closed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7566/20]

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Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As Chair of the Retail Consultation Forum, I am aware that this is a challenging time for retailers across Ireland - large and small. It is a particularly difficult time for retailers who have had to close their doors in the interest of public health and adherence to the public health guidelines.

The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business published on Friday 1st May sets out five stages for modifying 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 the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

Large supermarkets have been able to remain open under the measures published on the 27th March which included the updated list of essential retail outlets <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/625292-updated-list-of-essential-retail-outlets-27th-march-2020/>. On 15 May, 2020 the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business from Monday May 18, 2020. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of essential retail outlets and other facilities that can therefore reopen under Phase 1 are available on the Government's website <https://www.gov.ie/en/news/58bc8b-taoiseach-announces-roadmap-for-reopening-society-and-business-and-u/>

Under the risk based approach deployed in the Roadmap, under Phase 2 (from June 8th) small retail outlets can reopen with a small number of staff on the basis that the retailer can control the number of individuals that staff and customers interact with at any one time. These measures will only come into place 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.

As Chairperson of the Retail Consultation Forum I have previously communicated with the major grocery multiples that where retail outlets and stores have discrete drapery and clothing sections or floors, these should close in line with the Government's announcements on non-essential retail. I understand some essential retailers such as large supermarkets may carry products which are incidental to their primary retail function.

I have separately communicated to the Retail Consultation Forum members and the grocery multiples, at the request of the Department of An Taoiseach, that the Gardaí have asked them to consider not holding weekly specials over the next few weeks that risk giving rise to increased footfall at stores, and thereby present challenges to physical distancing.

The advice for individuals is still to stay at home as much as possible. During Phase 1, it is intended that customers should restrict visits to such stores for essential supplies. All retailers are encouraged to continue to provide on-line services where that is possible and appropriate to minimise footfall. All of these retail outlets must implement physical distancing measures and measures set out in the National Return to Work Safely Protocol.

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

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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 imperative that all businesses must adhere to physical distancing requirements and the latest public health guidance at all times.

A wide range of financial supports and guidance has been made available by my Department and wider Government to help businesses impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Full details of all supports and guidance is available at <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>

It is important to check <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/c36c85-covid-19-coronavirus/> for the latest information, public health advice and guidelines from Government in relation to Covid-19.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

433. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if startup businesses that began trading in late 2019 or in 2020 are eligible for the restart grant that was confirmed for SMEs recently in view of the fact that in these instances the businesses will not have a record of paying commercial rates for 2019. [7568/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): On Friday, May 15th, 2020 the Government announced details of the new €250m Restart Grant providing direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures; with the grant being administered by local authorities from Friday, May 22nd, 2020.

Eligible businesses who have stayed open throughout the crisis, as well as those who are reopening under Phase 1 (from 18th May) and Phase 2 (8th June) of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, are encouraged to apply first for the Restart Grant. These applications will be prioritised for payment by the local authorities.

To avail of the Restart Grant, applicants must be a commercial business and 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 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 retain employees that are on The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme.

Subject to the qualifying criteria outlined above, any business that has a commercially rateable premises including those businesses with outstanding rates bills are eligible to make an application if they meet the criteria. The grant will be the amount of the rates demand in respect of calendar year 2019 only, subject to a minimum of €2,000 and a maximum of €10,000.

If a company is currently in a rateable premise but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

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Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information can be obtained by contacting the Business Support Unit of the relevant local authority.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

434. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if there are grants available to business to install safety equipment and other measures to reduce the spread of Covid-19 (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7572/20]

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 15th 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 based on 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 22nd 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

Questions - Written Answers

435. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if there are exemptions for workers who travel to Scotland on Mondays and return here on Fridays as part of business travel; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7600/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy will be aware, the Government announced last week that it will be obligatory for passengers arriving from overseas to complete a COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form.

The regulations will be signed by my colleague, Minister Harris, and will come into effect from Thursday, May 28th. They will remain in effect until 18 June 2020, when they will be reviewed.

The Government continues to advise Irish citizens and residents against all non-essential international travel, and passengers arriving into Ireland from outside of the island of Ireland are asked to self-isolate for 14 days.

Covid-19 Pandemic

436. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if pubs that always sold food and tea and coffee can operate during phase 3 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business without a restaurant licence if they can guarantee strict social distancing and hygiene measures will be in place; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7602/20]

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>

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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 re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant is 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 grant is equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

If a company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority.

All information including the application form is available on the appropriate local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

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. While I do not have responsibility for granting licences to pubs, I will bring the concerns expressed by that sector to the attention of my Ministerial colleagues who have such responsibility so that they can be considered as further decisions relating to the reopening of the economy are taken in accordance with the Government's Roadmap.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

437. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation

if the criteria of the new restart grant will be changed to across the board and not be based on the commercial rates of 2019 in view of the fact some businesses due to their nature have been impacted more than others and have suffered a larger loss of earnings. [7634/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The application forms for the new €250m Restart Grant providing direct grant aid to micro and small businesses is available online on all local authority websites since Friday 22nd May. Eligible businesses who have remained open, or that reopened under phase 1 on 18th May or that are due to reopen in Phase 2 on 8th June under the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business to ease the COVID-19 restrictions are encouraged to apply now for the Restart Grant. These applications will be prioritised for payment by the local authorities.

The Restart Grant is aimed at helping micro and small businesses with the costs associated with reopening and re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures.

To avail of the Restart Grant, applicants must be a commercial business and 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 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 retain employees that are on The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme and re-employ staff on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment as business recovers.

Subject to the qualifying criteria outlined above, any business that has a commercially rateable premises including those businesses with outstanding rates bills are eligible to make an application if they meet the criteria. The grant will be the amount of the rates demand in respect of calendar year 2019 only, subject to a minimum of €2,000 and a maximum of €10,000.

If a company is currently in a rateable premise but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Businesses who are not in a rateable premises are not eligible.

I understand the concerns relating to business that do not operate from commercial premises.

We opted for payment through the rates system because it is a ready-established system for financial transactions with local business so it was the quickest way to get money to businesses.

Tradespersons and service providers that operate on a mobile basis or that could continue to work remotely have been better placed to continue to trade and many don't have the same levels of losses, of ongoing overheads or reopening costs that a fixed premises business will have. Within the funding available, the priority has been to support those who have suffered most, including closure of the business, but who will still have incurred ongoing costs.

The eligibility criteria is subject to ongoing review and we will continue to take on board issues as they arise.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

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438. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if seasonal work and seasonal businesses that rely on a window of a few months to earn their living, for example, seaside resorts, cafés, pubs, restaurants and so on that will lose a full season will be included in Covid-19 payments and the restart grant. [7653/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The application form for the new €250m Restart Grant providing direct grant aid to micro and small businesses is available online on all local authority websites since Friday 22nd May. Eligible businesses who have remained open, or that reopened under phase 1 on 18th May or that are due to reopen in Phase 2 on 8th June under the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business to ease the COVID-19 restrictions are encouraged to apply for the Restart Grant. These applications will be prioritised for payment by the local authorities.

The Restart Grant is aimed at helping micro and small businesses with the costs associated with reopening and re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures.

To avail of the Restart Grant, applicants must be a commercial business and 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 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 retain employees that are on The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme.

Subject to the qualifying criteria outlined above, any business that has a commercially rateable premises including those businesses with outstanding rates bills are eligible to make an application if they meet the criteria.

Businesses that are part of a tenancy arrangement, and who pay their rates via the landlord, are entitled to apply. Landlords who apportion their rates demand among their business tenants are not eligible in their own right. As above, applications should be submitted by the tenant business.

The grant will be the amount of the rates demand in respect of calendar year 2019 only, subject to a minimum of €2,000 and a maximum of €10,000.

The grant is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grant could be used to defray ongoing fixed costs, eg utilities, insurance, refurbishment or for restocking and measures 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 grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority.

Questions - Written Answers

439. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if businesses that do not pay rates are eligible for the restart grant if their respective landlords pay the rates directly; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7682/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): On Friday, May 15th, 2020 the Government announced details of the new €250m Restart Grant providing direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures; with the grant being administered by local authorities from Friday, May 22nd, 2020.

To avail of the Restart Grant, applicants must be a commercial business and 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 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 retain employees that are on The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme.

Subject to the qualifying criteria outlined above, any business that has a commercially rateable premises including those businesses with outstanding rates bills are eligible to make an application if they meet the criteria. The grant will be the amount of rates demand in respect of calendar year 2019 only, subject to a minimum of €2,000 and a maximum of €10,000.

If a company is currently in a rateable premise but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Businesses that are part of a tenancy arrangement, and who pay their rates via the landlord, are entitled to apply.

Landlords who apportion their rates demand among their business tenants are not eligible in their own right. Applications should be submitted by the occupier, i.e. the tenant business.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities since Friday, May 22nd and further information on the Grant can be obtained by contacting the Business Support Unit of the relevant local authority.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

440. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if a proposal to reopen a business (details supplied) will be considered; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7724/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am aware that the business you refer to has been in contact with my Department through our business supports email helpline service and our Press Office.

I wish to reiterate the advice that has previously been given by my Department. Please note that decisions around reopening will be guided by public health advice and that issues which relate to public health are not a matter for this Department.

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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://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 re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant is 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 grant is equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

If a company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Questions - Written Answers

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority.

All information including the application form will be available on your local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

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

441. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will revisit the distinction between homewares and hardware stores with regard to reopening under the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business and encourage them to implement safety procedures and initiate reopening as soon as possible; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7811/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As Chair of the Retail Consultation Forum, I am aware that this is a challenging time for retailers across Ireland - large and small. It is a particularly difficult time for retailers who have had to close their doors in the interest of public health and adherence to the public health guidelines.

The Government’s Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business published on Friday 1st May sets out five stages for modifying 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 the Roadmap will be guided by the public health advice at the time.

On 15 May, 2020 the Government announced that we would move to Phase 1 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business from Monday May 18, 2020. This is in line with advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The categories of workers, list of essential retail outlets and other facilities that can therefore reopen under Phase 1 are available on the Government’s website <https://www.gov.ie/en/news/58bc8b-taoiseach-announces-roadmap-for-reopening-society-and-business-and-u/>

With regard to homeware outlets, I wish to draw your attention to the list of retailers that can open published on 15th May, as hardware stores, builders merchants and those providing essential supplies and tools for gardening, farming and agriculture; garden centres and farmers

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markets; Opticians/Optometrists/Outlets providing hearing test services, selling hearing aids and appliances; retailers involved in the sale, supply and repair of motor vehicles, motorcycles and bicycles and related facilities (e.g. tyre sales and repairs); office products and services; electrical, IT and phone sales, repair and maintenance services for home. This does not include homeware stores. <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/3736c7-government-approves-moving-to-phase-1-of-easing-covid-19-restriction/>

Only stores providing homeware incidental to primary retail functions set out in the original Essential Services list are to reopen in Phase 1. It is not intended that stores which might also classify themselves as homeware, but primarily sell items such as furniture, bedding, curtains, kitchenware, crockery or other such items etc. should open.

The advice for individuals is still to stay at home as much as possible. During Phase 1, it is intended that customers should restrict visits to such stores for essential supplies. All retailers are encouraged to continue to provide on-line services where that is possible and appropriate to minimise footfall. All of these retail outlets must implement physical distancing measures and measures set out in the National Return to Work Safely Protocol.

Government will monitor progress on Phase 1 over the first two weeks and will assess progress next week. As set out in the Roadmap, Phase 2 is a reopening based on size rather than sector.

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.

It is imperative that all businesses must adhere to physical distancing requirements and the latest public health guidance at all times.

A wide range of financial supports and guidance has been made available by my Department and wider Government to help businesses impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Full details of all supports and guidance is available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>

It is important to check <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/c36c85-covid-19-coronavirus/> for the latest information, public health advice and guidelines from Government in relation to Covid-19.

Health and Safety Inspections

442. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of workplace inspections that have taken place by the Health and Safety Authority in meat factories since the Covid-19 emergency emerged in March 2020 to ensure worker protection by county in tabular form. [7834/20]

451. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if factories and meat processing plants will be inspected by the Health and Safety Authority to ensure safeguarding of employees; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7940/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 442 and 451 together.

The Health and Safety Authority's annual programme of work is based on a risk assessment of sectors, with inspections targeted at sectors with higher levels of workplace fatalities and accidents. The food sector is a highly regulated sector with a high level of compliance with Health and Safety legislation. Thus, in any one year the Health and Safety Authority carries out a lower level of inspections in the food Sector compared to the construction or farming sectors where workplace fatalities and accidents are considerable higher.

In relation to COVID-19 specifically, infectious diseases are not reportable under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Reporting of Accidents and Dangerous Occurrences) Regulations 2016 (S.I. No. 370 of 2016) nor is there a requirement to notify the Health & Safety Authority if an employee contracts Covid19. Therefore, outbreaks of an infectious disease, such as Covid19, are in the first instance reportable to Medical Officer of Health/Director of Public Health and they report the outbreak to the Health Protection Surveillance Centre, under the HSE, who move to put in place infection control measures.

The Health and Safety Authority has been involved in reviewing matters relating to the meat processing sector over the past number of weeks as it is a member of the National Outbreak Control Team (NOTC) headed up by the HSE. This team, which is led by the HSE, reports to the Department of Health and the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET). The NOTC is working to address the issue of outbreaks in meat processing plants and has input from professionals in public health, environmental health, animal health and the Health and Safety Authority, in relation to occupational health and safety. The National Outbreak Control Team and local Outbreak Control Teams are in place to address outbreaks of COVID-19 and to recommend steps and measures to ensure that current and future outbreaks can be managed and brought under control as quickly as possible. COVID-19 is first and foremost a public health issue so the first step must always be ensuring that measures are in place to manage and prevent outbreaks not just for the workers involved but also for the wider community where such workers live.

The National Outbreak Control Team has devised detailed guidance specifically tailored to the meat industry. This guidance document, which was issued to all meat processing facilities on 15 May 2020 covers:

- Infection prevention and control measures to prevent cases and control outbreaks for example screening at entry to the site;
- Steps to be taken when an individual case is suspected or confirmed; and
- Additional steps to be taken when an outbreak has occurred.

Information on this is available on the HPSC website at [this link](#).

Following the roll-out of the Return to Work Safely Protocol that preceded the start of Phase 1 of the reopening of the economy on 18th May last, over 500 onsite inspections (as of Friday 22nd May) were undertaken by the Health and Safety Authority last week across a range of industry sectors. These inspections included plants in the meat processing sector. In relation to complaints specifically about meat processing plants, the Authority received seven complaints up to May 20th covering four different operators. As the Health and Safety Authority receives

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complaints on a confidential basis, a breakdown by County would not be appropriate for this sector. As part of the work with the National and Local OCTs mentioned above, the Health and Safety Authority are following up on each of these complaints, including completion of onsite inspections. It is worth noting that the Department of Agriculture, who have an ongoing role in meat processing plants, is also a member of the National OCT and they too will be checking compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol in such plants in the future too.

The Health and Safety Authority's Workplace Contact Unit is a confidential helpline for workers, employers and others to submit queries and complaints. This can be contacted by telephone 1890 289 389 and email wcu@hsa.ie. If any worker has a concern about Health and Safety in their workplace, whether that is in meat processing or elsewhere, they should contact the Health and Safety Authority Workplace Contact Unit.

Consumer Protection

443. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she has taken action to seek compensation from car manufacturers over the use of cheat devices; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7848/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The power to enforce consumer protection legislation is reserved for the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, a body that is statutorily independent of the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation. I understand that a number of claims by owners of diesel vehicles affected by cheat devices, or defeat devices as they are also known, are currently before the courts in Ireland. In some cases, actions are being taken on behalf of a number of car owners.

While car manufacturers have contested these claims, there have been important recent developments in response to claims for compensation in other European countries. In Germany, Volkswagen reached a settlement in late February 2020 with the Federal Association of Consumers following an action taken by the Association on behalf of 400,000 car owners. In the course of the proceedings, the State court hearing the case advised the parties to seek a settlement. Under the settlement, Volkswagen agreed to pay compensation totalling €830 million to the car owners concerned. The compensation to be paid to individual owners ranges from €1,350 to €6,250 depending on the age of the vehicle. On 25 May 2020, Germany's highest civil court, the Federal Court of Justice, ruled in a landmark judgment that the owner of a Volkswagen diesel minivan purchased in 2014 was entitled to return the vehicle to the manufacturer and receive a refund of approximately 80 per cent of the payment price. The judgment held that the vehicle's mileage should be taken into account in calculating the compensation payable to the owner. In a statement issued in response to the judgment, the company indicated that it would seek to bring compensation claims by a further 60,000 car owners in Germany to a prompt conclusion and would be making appropriate settlement proposals to these claimants. It is relevant to note that neither the German government nor the consumer protection authorities in Germany have had any direct involvement in either the compensation settlement with the Federal Association of Consumers or the compensation claims taken by individual car owners.

In a significant preliminary judgment in a group action taken by 90,000 car owners, the High Court of England and Wales ruled on 6 April 2020 that the software installed in diesel cars manufactured by the Volkswagen Group was a defeat device under the relevant EU regulations. In an Opinion of 30 April 2020 in a case referred to the European Court of Justice, the Advocate General noted that the use of defeat devices that reduce the effectiveness of emission controls systems is prohibited under EU law and may be authorised only in exceptional circumstances where, for example, their use is justified to protect the engine against damage or accident and

for the safe operation of the vehicle. This exception must however be interpreted strictly and is limited to protecting the engine against the occurrence of immediate and sudden damage and not against more long-term effects such as wear and tear or depreciation. Though the Opinion of the Advocate General is not binding on the European Court of Justice, it is followed by the Court in the majority of cases.

I fully support the claims of car owners whose vehicles have been affected by cheat devices installed by car manufacturers to appropriate compensation for the detriment caused by these devices. In view in particular of the settlement reached with the Federal Association of Consumers in Germany and of the judgment of the Federal Court of Justice in Germany, it is now time for Volkswagen and other car manufacturers whose vehicles had cheat devices installed in them to come forward with fair proposals to compensate affected car owners in Ireland.

Consumer Protection

444. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the measures that will be taken to ensure that consumer rights are protected and that no excessive charging for products such as handwash and sanitiser take place during the Covid-19 crisis period; and the recourse consumers have for the excessive charging for such products (details supplied). [7858/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The power for Government under section 62 of the Consumer Protection Act 2007 to fix by order the maximum price at which a product can be supplied to consumers applies only where an emergency order is in force in relation to that product under section 61 of the Act. Section 61 provides that if the Government are of the opinion that abnormal circumstances prevail or are likely to prevail in relation to the supply of a product, the Government may by order declare that a state of emergency affecting the supply of that product exists.

The information available to me does not suggest that abnormal circumstances currently prevail in relation to the supply of hand washes and hand sanitisers. These products are relatively widely available in supermarkets and pharmacies and can also be purchased online. Therefore the requirement for abnormal circumstances in relation to the supply of hand washes and hand sanitisers, which is a prerequisite for the enactment of a maximum price order for these products, is not apparently met in present circumstances.

Though the details supplied by the Deputy may suggest that high prices are being charged for particular hand sanitiser products in some cases, more reasonable prices are being charged in other cases. Where high prices are being charged by retailers, these may reflect high wholesaler prices set by suppliers, many of whom may be based outside Ireland.

While there may well be cases of price hikes by individual traders, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) data compiled by the Central Statistics Office do not suggest that retailers generally have taken advantage of the exceptional circumstances resulting from Covid-19 to introduce unjustified price increases. As measured by the CPI, prices were on average 0.4 per cent lower in April 2020 than in March 2020 and 0.1 per cent lower than in April 2019. Though prices for hygiene products which include liquid soaps but not hand sanitisers were 1 per cent higher in April 2020 than in March 2020, they were 1.7 per cent lower than in April 2019. The price of these products had previously fallen by 1.8 per cent between February 2020 and March 2020. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission have advised me that they have received a total of 13 complaints from consumers about the price of hand sanitisers since the start of the pandemic.

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If consumers consider that retailers are charging excessive prices for hand sanitisers or other products, the most effective recourse available to them is to take their custom to retailers charging more reasonable prices.

Covid-19 Pandemic

445. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if bouncy castle companies are able to reopen in phase 1 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business if they only supply private homes with equipment for private family parties; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7893/20]

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. For a full list of supports for business please see <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

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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 re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant is 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 grant is equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000.

If a company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority.

All information including the application form will be available on the appropriate local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

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

446. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if additional powers have been granted to the Health and Safety Authority to deal with the issues posed by Covid-19 in terms of health and safety at work. [7897/20]

474. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to place the national return to work safely protocol on a statutory footing; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8138/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 446 and 474 together.

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. The Protocol should be used by all workplaces to adapt their workplaces 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 is operating in parallel with existing

workplace health and safety statutory requirements.

I would emphasise that, in the first instance, employers and workers have a responsibility to actively and jointly take responsibility for applying, and adhering to, the procedures and practices set out in the Protocol designed to protect the health and safety of all concerned.

Under the Health, Safety and Welfare at Work Act, 2005, the Health and Safety Authority (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 at this time.

The Health and Safety Authority is the lead Agency in relation to oversight and compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol. It is ensuring compliance with the Protocol through a range of measures including advice, guidance, inspection and enforcement action as appropriate and as set out in the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005.

The HSA is carrying out a mix of unannounced inspections, along with providing advice and information through the HSA Workplace Contact Unit email and phonenumber, tel: 1890 289 389 and email wcu@hsa.ie. 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.

The Government is satisfied that in terms of overseeing adherence to the Protocol, there are sufficient legislative powers under the Health and Safety at work legislation, as well as existing and enhanced public health powers and the suite of employment rights legislation, to ensure, and enforce, if necessary, full compliance with the Protocol.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

447. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she will provide a bespoke support scheme for private bus and coach operators affected by the Covid-19 lockdown; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7918/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): 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/>.

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.

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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 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 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.

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, Microfinance 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.

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.

The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport may be able to provide further information to the Deputy in relation to this matter.

Covid-19 Pandemic

448. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if businesses that provide a repair service such as jewellers are permitted to conduct drop-off and collection services during this period of the Covid-19 restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7919/20]

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

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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.

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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/>.

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If a company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority.

All information including the application form will be available on the appropriate local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

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 ambi-

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tion, 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.

Question No. 449 answered with Question No. 394.

Covid-19 Pandemic

450. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of businesses that closed due to Covid-19 by sectoral category; the estimated number of businesses that will reopen at each phase of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; if she is satisfied that the necessary resources are available for the inspection and enforcement workload likely to present at each of the reopening phases; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7922/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy will appreciate, any thorough analysis of company closures on account of COVID-19 will require hard data which will arise from a variety of sources over the course of any given year. Insights are currently available from business surveys, stakeholder engagements, and real-time data at the level of employee where employees interact with the State's employment support system.

I would refer the Deputy to my Department's recent report on *Economic Considerations for Reinstating Economic Activity* which is publicly available on my Department's website. The report includes analyses by the Department of Finance and the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform which makes clear that the most-heavily impacted sectors are Accommodation and Food, Construction, Administrative and Support Services, Wholesale & Retail Trade, and other Personal Services. Other sectors where the impacts are significant but somewhat less severe include the Manufacturing sector, and Transport and Storage. This pattern of sectoral impacts is similar to that observed in other countries. In terms of employment, the report observes that the Department of Finance's 'central' scenario in its Stability Programme Update projects employment to fall substantially in 2020, with approximately 220,000 jobs being lost. The unemployment rate is projected to dramatically rise over the first half of the year, with an average rate in the mid 20% range during the second quarter, before falling over the second half of the year, as containment measures are gradually eased.

The CSO has conducted surveys on the business impacts of COVID-19 with the most recent release of 18th May last presenting findings of the second wave of the exercise. The Business Impact of COVID-19 Survey (BICS) has been created to measure and report quickly on the impact of COVID-19 on business in Ireland. A total of 3,000 enterprises were surveyed online for BICS Wave Two, with 24.5% of sampled enterprises completing the survey. The survey reports:

- Nearly one in four (23.9%) enterprises had ceased trading either temporarily or permanently on 3 May 2020.

- Almost a quarter (23.0%) of enterprises closed temporarily while 0.9% closed perma-

nently.

- More than three in four (76.0%) of responding enterprises were continuing to trade in some capacity on 3rd May 2020.

- Among the enterprises who responded to both waves of the survey, one in six of those who had ceased trading temporarily by 19 April indicated that they had recommenced trading by 3 May.

Of note also is that:

- Two-thirds of Construction enterprises ceased trading either temporarily or permanently. Again, one would expect this to decrease arising from the return of construction activities in Phase 1 of the Roadmap.

- Seven in ten enterprises had lower turnover due to COVID-19 over the two-week period from 20 April to 3 May 2020.

- Exports decreased for over half of responding enterprises.

- Almost half of responding enterprises expressed confidence in having financial resources to continue operating for longer than six months.

- Over half of enterprises availed of Government supports schemes.

- Social distancing in the workplace implemented by over half of respondents. Over half (53.2%) of responding enterprises had implemented working arrangements to facilitate social distancing in the workplace at some point during the COVID-19 crisis. This rose to 77.4% of enterprises in the Manufacturing sector.

Turning to the issue of inspection and enforcement, the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) is the lead Agency in relation to oversight and compliance with the national Return to Work Safely Protocol. It will ensure compliance with the Protocol through a range of measures including advice, guidance, inspection and enforcement action as appropriate and as provided for in the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005.

The HSA is deploying all of its available field inspectors across all sectors to carry out both spot checks and other inspections to check compliance with the Protocol. However, the Government will ensure that 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.

While details of these additional resources are currently being finalised, the numbers working with the HSA will be in the hundreds, from across the system. These will be specialist officials who already have sectoral business inspection responsibilities. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has given a commitment that inspectors from his Department will work with the HSA to ensure the implementation of the Protocol in workplaces. Compliance with the COVID-19 Return to Work Safely Protocol will become part of the normal inspection regime. It will start shortly with around 200 officials 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. The details are being finalised at present.

Question No. 451 answered with Question No. 442.

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452. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if businesses selling hemp products are excluded from the range of Covid-19 business grants available through Enterprise Ireland; if so, the reason for such an exclusion; if she will reconsider the eligibility for the grant in view of the fact these companies are also negatively affected by Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7986/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I understand that Enterprise Ireland is currently not in a position to support companies active in the area of cannabis-based products. Enterprise Ireland's position is based on the fact that products containing any trace of THC are considered as a controlled drug in Ireland under the Misuse of Drugs Orders.

Currently, there is no lower limit of THC permissible under national legislation. Therefore, products which can contain even minimal levels of THC pose a reputational risk to Enterprise Ireland as the agency is not in a position to verify which companies, products and extraction methods meet the legal requirement in Ireland to contain 0.00% levels of THC, at least until there are further legislative or regulatory developments which may mitigate the reputational risks in future.

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453. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her views on correspondence from an organisation (details supplied) on confirming the situation regarding the return to work of construction workers who work mainly indoors. [7992/20]

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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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.

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454. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to amend the criteria for the restart grant taking into account the needs of recently established businesses that might not have a rates evaluation for 2019; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8002/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): On Friday, May 15th, 2020 the Government announced details of the new €250m Restart Grant providing direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures; with the grant being administered by local authorities from Friday, May 22nd, 2020.

Eligible businesses who have stayed open throughout the crisis, as well as those who are reopening under Phase 1 (from 18th May) and Phase 2 (8th June) of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, are encouraged to apply for the Restart Grant. These applications will be prioritised for payment by the local authorities.

To avail of the Restart Grant, applicants must be a commercial business and 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 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 retain employees that are on The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme and re-employ staff on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment as business recovers.

Subject to the qualifying criteria outlined above, any business that has a commercially rateable premises including those businesses with outstanding rates bills are eligible to make an application if they meet the criteria. The grant will be the amount of the rates demand in respect of calendar year 2019 only, subject to a minimum of €2,000 and a maximum of €10,000.

In the case of a recently established company, if the company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not addressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority.

The eligibility criteria will be subject to ongoing review and we will continue to take on board issues as they arise.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

455. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the purpose of placing a 50% portfolio cap on the credit guarantee scheme; the portfolio caps on each guarantee scheme run by other EU countries in response to Covid-19 in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8014/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The new €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme forms a significant component of the Gov-

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ernment'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.

My officials are also 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 Credit Guarantee Scheme operates using a portfolio approach whereby the entirety of a participating finance provider's qualifying finance agreements in respect of which guarantees have been given will be treated as a single portfolio under this Scheme. The portfolio of each financial provider is subject to a percentage portfolio cap which is set in the Credit Guarantee Act, 2012, as amended. The portfolio cap under the current Credit Guarantee Scheme is 13%. It is currently proposed to increase the portfolio cap for the Covid-19 CGS to 50%.

An increase in the level of the portfolio cap will provide lenders with a higher incentive to offer facilities under the guarantee while at the same time the exposure to the exchequer and the risks associated with these loans will be shared between the Government and the financial providers.

Comprehensive information regarding the portfolio caps on each credit guarantee scheme developed by other EU countries is not publicly available as different countries do not always publish this information. I assure the Deputy that the scheme for Ireland has been designed to provide much-needed access to finance for a wide range of businesses which are currently under financial strain arising from the Covid-19 crisis.

Covid-19 Pandemic

456. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if an analysis has been carried out by her Department on the impact on productivity in the construction sector as a result of Covid-19 restrictions and social distancing; the impact in terms of input costs; the way in which that will impact the viability of housing and apartment projects; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8005/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation does not have policy responsibility for the construction sector although the Department and its agencies do engage in a limited way with the sector, mainly from a developmental perspective. Therefore an analysis of the type referred to in the question, including as regards impacts on the housing market, has not been undertaken.

One area of involvement, through Enterprise Ireland, is in the promotion and internationalisation of indigenous enterprise. In this regard, Enterprise Ireland supports a limited number of firms (approximately 750 out of a total of 50,000 construction enterprises) with construction products and services looking to engage with international markets.

In an effort to realise the potential of digital tools and processes within Ireland's construc-

tion sector and improve productivity, Enterprise Ireland has played a lead role in supporting the adoption of Building Information Modelling (BIM) in recent years – including its initial convening of the National BIM Council in 2016. This has largely been driven by the increasing requirement for BIM in international markets, and the need to equip the Enterprise Ireland client base, as well as potential exporters, with the competencies necessary to engage with markets in which BIM adoption is standard.

The Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out a gradual easing of restrictions with Phase 1 including a phased return of outdoor workers including construction workers. The roadmap suggests a gradual reopening of sites with a focus in Phase 1 on site preparation and outdoor work with indoor work accommodated in Phase 2. Social distancing requirements will continue to apply. The construction industry is largely not public facing and can adopt safe work practices in a controlled environment, ensuring all public health guidelines are adhered to.

The reliance of the construction sector on foreign-national labour means there is potential for labour supply shortages as activity recommences if a share of the workforce has left Ireland during the COVID-19 restrictions. The sector also relies heavily on material inputs such as concrete, steel and other building materials and as such it will be important that supply chain issues (e.g. manufacturing, mining/quarrying, freight transport) do not prevent projects from progressing. Construction activity is also reliant on a functioning planning system (especially important for some strategic projects underway in the multinational sector) and use real estate services as the primary route to market. These interdependent activities, which are components of other sectors, would also need to be active in order to minimise disruptions. Ensuring that bottlenecks in the supply of labour, raw materials and supporting sectors are swiftly addressed will minimise the potential impact on productivity in the construction sector as activity restarts.

In support of the work of the Construction Sector Group - composed of the key Construction stakeholders in the public and private sectors to support the delivery of Project Ireland 2040, and which includes representation from the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation - the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform commissioned an international benchmarking and economic analysis of the causes of productivity trends in the construction sector in Ireland. This was prior to the impact of Covid-19 on the Irish and global economies.

This analysis, which is now complete, contains a series of recommendations for enhancing the productivity performance of the Irish Construction sector, and the membership of the Construction Sector Group has approved an action plan to deliver these actions. The implementation of these actions will be monitored through the quarterly meetings of the Group and which will form part of its annual work programme.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

457. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the rules regarding the restart grant; if the grant is based on 2019 commercial rates; the way in which that impacts businesses that do not pay commercial rates or businesses that have recently started and were not liable for 2019 commercial rates; if these businesses are prohibited from applying for the grant; if legislation is required to alter this; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8007/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): On Friday, May 15th, 2020 the Government announced details of the new €250m Restart Grant providing direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures; with the grant being

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administered by local authorities from Friday, May 22nd, 2020.

Eligible businesses who have stayed open throughout the crisis, as well as those who are reopening under Phase 1 (from 18th May) and Phase 2 (8th June) of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, are encouraged to apply for the Restart Grant. These applications will be prioritised for payment by the local authorities.

To avail of the Restart Grant, applicants must be a commercial business and 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 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 retain employees that are on the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme.

Subject to the qualifying criteria outlined above, any business that has a commercially rateable premises including those businesses with outstanding rates bills are eligible to make an application if they meet the criteria. The grant will be the amount of the rates demand in respect of calendar year 2019 only, subject to a minimum of €2,000 and a maximum of €10,000.

If a company is currently in a rateable premise but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

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.

We will monitor the Restart Grant as it is rolled out and continue to take on board issues as they arise. Legislation is not required to alter the terms to this Scheme if deemed necessary in the future.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities since Friday, May 22nd, 2020 and further information can be obtained by contacting the Business Support Unit of the relevant local authority.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

458. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the schemes in her Department in place to assist Covid-19-impacted businesses; the number of loans drawn down since 1 March 2020 in each instance; the aggregate amount drawn down under each scheme since 1 March 2020; the number of businesses that have availed of each scheme since 1 March 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8009/20]

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. There are currently a number of loan guarantee schemes in place which support the working capital needs of impacted businesses.

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Microfinance Ireland (MFI) was introduced as a support to microenterprises to help them address funding needs and provides loans to microenterprises that do not meet the conventional risk criteria of banks. These loans are available to 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.

MFI provides vital support to microenterprises by filling the lending gap in the market by lending to businesses that cannot obtain loans from other commercial lenders. Where typical MFI loans are available at an interest rate of 6.8-7.8%, Covid-19 loans are available at an interest rate of 4.5% where the application is made through the network of Local Enterprise Offices around the country, or where referred by a bank or Local Development Committees. Where an application is made directly to MFI, the interest rate is 5.5%. These loans also include an option for a moratorium on interest and repayments for the first six months.

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 Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI). It currently makes available a fund of up to €200m to eligible businesses that are exposed to impacts arising from the outbreak of Covid-19, to enable those businesses to innovate, change or adapt in response to the current business environment.

Loans under this scheme are easier to access and offered at favourable terms when compared with other similar loans in the market, for example the maximum interest rate under the scheme is 4% and loans of up to €500,000 are available unsecured. Applicants may also be able to avail of a three-month interest-only payment period (depending on your lender's assessment of your application).

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.

Table of uptake:

Scheme	Applications	Amount drawn down	Number of Business that availed of scheme
Microfinance Ireland Covid-19 Loan	2,574 inquiries	€9,158,992	329 loans sanctioned
SCBI Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme	2,305 deemed eligible applicants	loans sanctioned to a total value of €37,811,000	273 loans sanctioned (all figures as of May 21st 2020)

As part of the 8 April announcement, I also announced a further €200m expansion of the Future Growth Loan Scheme. This scheme initially made available a fund of €300m to support loans to eligible businesses for strategic investment. The current scheme provides loans from €100,000 (€50,000 for farmers) to €3m per eligible business, for terms of 8-10 years. My Department is working through the details of this expansion and will bring this funding to market as soon as possible.

The Government on 2nd May also 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.

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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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

459. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the financial supports that will be provided to the retail sector, particularly smaller scale businesses, to resume trading in view of current economic difficulties and the growth in online international business and its impact on smaller retail businesses; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8012/20]

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.

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/>.

The growth in demand for shopping online domestically and globally is driving the retail sector more broadly to develop its online capability in order to enhance its competitiveness. 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: Trading Online Vouchers for micro enterprises in partnership with the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and the Environment, Richard Bruton TD; and a special Covid-19 Online Retail Scheme for indigenous retailers with 10 or more employees administered by Enterprise Ireland.

Firstly, in conjunction with Minister Bruton's Department of Communications, 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

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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. 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 domestic and international consumer demand with a competitive online offer.

My Department has introduced 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>.

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 re-employing 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.

If a company is currently in a rateable premise but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been. Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority.

All information including the application form will be available on the local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

I am committed to supporting the needs of the retail sector at this time and in developing their online capability and enhancing their competitiveness.

Finally, it is important that all businesses check <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/c36c85-covid-19-coronavirus/> for the latest information, public health advice and guidelines from Government in relation to Covid-19.

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460. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of complaints received by the Health and Safety Authority regarding Covid-19 restrictions and social distancing in workplaces since 12 March 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8020/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Health and Safety Authority's Workplace Contact Unit (WCU) is a helpdesk resource for employers, employees and members of the public. Since the beginning of March 2020, the WCU has dealt with a wide variety of queries and complaints, with a vast number of these pertaining to the application of public health measures in specific workplaces. The nature of these queries has evolved in recent weeks in tandem with new or additional public health measures announced by the Government to delay the spread of COVID-19.

In the period requested, from 12 March 2020 to date, 2,867 contacts were received by the WCU specifically in relation to COVID-19, which represented 2,512 Requests for Information (RFI) and 355 complaints. Of the 355 complaints received in relation to COVID-19, 299 reference either physical distancing or social distancing.

Each complaint received by the HSA is initially followed up with the relevant company or employer by the Workplace Contact Unit. If there is no response, or the response is not satisfactory or in the event of receipt of multiple or serious allegations at any one time, an inspector will follow up with the employer. The inspector may then decide that a pre-arranged or unannounced inspection is warranted.

I can assure the Deputy that complaints received by the Health and Safety Authority have been followed up and addressed with the employer.

Health and Safety Inspections

461. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of inspection requests relating to Covid-19 received by the Health and Safety Authority since 12 March 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8021/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Health and Safety Authority's Workplace Contact Unit (WCU) is a helpdesk resource for employers, employees and members of the public. Since the beginning of March 2020, the WCU has dealt with a wide variety of queries and complaints, with a vast number of these pertaining to the application of public health measures in specific workplaces. The nature of these queries has evolved in recent weeks in tandem with new or additional public health measures announced by the Government to delay the spread of COVID-19.

In the period requested, from 12 March 2020 to date, 2,867 contacts were received by the WCU specifically in relation to COVID-19. The Health and Safety Authority does not categorise contacts by 'inspection request' however, it is worth noting that the 2,867 contacts received represented 2,512 Requests for Information (RFI) and 355 complaints.

Each complaint received by the HSA is initially followed up with the relevant company or employer by the Workplace Contact Unit. If there is no response, or the response is not satisfactory or in the event of receipt of multiple or serious allegations at any one time, an inspector will follow up with the employer. The inspector may then decide that a pre-arranged or unannounced inspection is warranted.

I can assure the Deputy that complaints received by the Health and Safety Authority have

been followed up and addressed with the employer.

Health and Safety Inspections

462. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of inspections carried out by the Health and Safety Authority on foot of Covid-19 complaints, inspection requests or other similar correspondence since 12 March 2020. [8022/20]

466. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if the number of workplace inspections that have taken place by the Health and Safety Authority since the Covid-19 emergency emerged in March 2020 to ensure worker protection from the virus. [8075/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris)(Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 462 and 466 together.

The Health and Safety Authority is the lead Agency in relation to oversight and compliance with the national Return to Work Safely Protocol. It will ensure compliance with the Protocol through a range of measures including advice, guidance, inspection and enforcement action as appropriate and as provided for in the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005.

Given the timeline, the number and nature of the complaints received by the HSA mirrors the changing NPHE and Government advice regarding businesses being open in this time period and a number of these complaints involved companies who had already closed. For the period requested, from 12 March to date, the Authority has received 355 complaints specifically in relation to COVID-19. Of the 355 complaints received to date in relation to COVID-19, 252 have been fully dealt with and closed and the rest are still open.

Furthermore, on 18 May 2020, in line with Phase 1 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, the Authority launched a national programme of inspections. Authority inspectors were on the ground from that date enforcing compliance with the national Return To Work Safely Protocol. Over 500 onsite inspections have been undertaken by the Authority (as of Friday 22nd May) across a range of industry sectors. Details of the most recent of these inspections may not yet have been recorded on the Authority's system, and this may impact (i.e. reduce) the number of open complaints referenced above.

Each complaint received by the HSA is initially followed up with the relevant company or employer by the Workplace Contact Unit. If there is no response, or the response is not satisfactory or in the event of receipt of multiple or serious allegations at any one time, an inspector will follow up with the employer. The inspector may then decide that a pre-arranged or unannounced inspection is warranted.

I can assure the Deputy that complaints received by the Health and Safety Authority have been followed up and addressed with the employer.

Any worker, employer or other stakeholder can submit a query or a complaint to the HSA helpline, the Workplace Contact Unit (WCU). This helpline is confidential and can be contacted by phone 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie. Every contact, whether a query or a complaint, is acknowledged and receives a reference number for tracking.

Question No. 463 answered with Question No. 406.

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Enterprise Support Services

464. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the business supports she has put in place for self-employed persons with a disability. [8058/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Ireland has a diverse SME ecosystem, of innovation driven enterprises, high-technology and high-growth, rural, owner-managers, family owned, traditional sectors, and a diverse profile of business owners including those with disabilities.

The OECD review of SMEs and Entrepreneurship in Ireland which I commissioned recognises that there is well-spring of entrepreneurship right across the country. It also recognises that the Local Enterprise Offices have made a marked improvement in the promotion of and supports for entrepreneurs and it is the LEOs that are the first stop shop for anyone thinking of starting a business, including those with disabilities.

The 31 Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs), located in the Local Authorities nationwide offer advice and guidance, financial assistance and other supports for anyone intending to start or grow a business. They operate on an equal opportunities basis and offer their services to any entrepreneur, regardless of their situation, in a fair and even-handed manner and in compliance with Government policy and all legal requirements.

The LEOs provide a ‘signposting’ service in relation to all relevant State supports available through agencies such as Revenue, the Department of Social Protection, Education and Training Boards, the Credit Review Office and Microfinance Ireland. In that regard, information in respect of a client’s disability or otherwise is not relevant, this also applies to the collation of the LEO Annual Employment Survey with regard to individuals employed in businesses supported by the 31 Local Enterprise Offices.

The LEOs can offer direct grant aid to any microenterprises (up to 10 employees) in the manufacturing and internationally traded services sector which, over time, have the potential to develop into strong export entities. Subject to certain eligibility criteria, the LEOs can provide financial assistance within three main categories

- **Feasibility Grants** (investigating the potential of a business idea)
- **Priming Grants** (to part-fund a start-up)
- **Business Development grants** for existing businesses that want to expand.

For Start-ups or expanding businesses, the LEOs may be able to offer ‘soft’ support in the form of training or provide a mentor to work with the business proposer including courses such as:

- **The Start Your Own Business programme** guides clients through the various aspects of business and business planning. The objective is to assist clients in assessing their idea, its viability and to decide if they should proceed or take a step back.

- **The Mentor Programme** is designed to match up the knowledge, skills, insights and entrepreneurial capability of experienced business practitioners with small business owner/ managers who need practical and strategic one to one advice and guidance.

Full detail on LEO supports are available on the Local Enterprise Office website at <https://www.localenterprise.ie/Discover-Business-Supports/>.

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Government has also responded rapidly to put in place appropriate supports for businesses that have been negatively impacted by Covid-19 but has not specifically introduced loan supports for self-employed persons with a disability. The Government continues to explore every available avenue for the delivery of further supports. To date, supports to businesses include:

- Microenterprises can access Covid-19 loans of up to €50,000 from Microfinance Ireland. Loans are available at an interest rate of between 4.5% and 5.5%, with the first six months interest and repayment free. Businesses can apply through their nearest LEO or directly at microfinanceireland.ie.

- The SBCI Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme for eligible businesses opened for eligibility applications on 23 March. The maximum loan size under the scheme is €1.5m (first €500,000 unsecured) and the maximum interest rate is set at 4%. Eligibility criteria apply. Applications can be made through the SBCI website at sbci.gov.ie

- The Credit Guarantee Scheme supports loans of up to €1m for periods of up to seven years. Applications can be made to AIB, Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank.

These schemes aside, we will also be supporting additional lending through the banks for longer-term loans to aid with strategic investment as the COVID-19 crisis moderates. To further assist companies to respond to these challenges, and in doing so stabilise and rebuild their business, Enterprise Ireland, on behalf of the Department of Business Enterprise and Innovation has launched a new suite of COVID-19 supports; these are:

- **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 within a three year time frame.

- **NEW HPSU:** 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. 337 applications have been received for Covid-19 Business Financial Planning Grant.

- **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

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the current pandemic. 156 applications have been received for the LEAN Business Continuity Voucher.

- **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.

Enterprise Ireland provides support for new start-ups and existing business through a wide range of initiatives and supports. The awarding of funding by the agency is based on eligibility, evaluation criteria and assessed company need.

I will continue to ensure equal opportunities for entrepreneurship across the population and to address gaps in the self-employment and entrepreneurship activity rates of those with disabilities. My agencies continue to work very closely with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and Intreo Offices in every county to ensure those seeking to get back to work or start a business are aware of the range of supports available.

Question No. 465 answered with Question No. 408.

Question No. 466 answered with Question No. 462.

Covid-19 Pandemic

467. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she and her colleagues have considered putting in place sector-specific task forces to oversee the lifting of restrictions and get businesses back to operating as quickly and as safely as possible as the United Kingdom has implemented. [8077/20]

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.

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.

A key tool in implementing the Roadmap is the Return to Work Safely Protocol. This Protocol clearly and comprehensively sets out the steps and processes employers and workers must take to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 in the workplace. The Protocol is available at <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.html>.

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The protocol was developed and agreed in consultation with the members of the Labour Employer Economic Forum, the forum for high-level dialogue between the Government and union and employer representatives on labour market issues. Participants in this process included IBEC, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Chambers Ireland and the Construction Industry Federation.

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.

Specific sectors may need to introduce additional safeguards but the Return to Work Safely Protocol sets the standard set of measures required in every workplace.

Since this crisis began, I have convened numerous meetings of the Enterprise Forum and the Retail Consultation Forum, which I chair. The Enterprise Forum enables me to meet with business representatives and our State agencies with a view to identifying solutions to key challenges faced by my Department, such as Brexit. The Retail Consultation Forum provides a platform for a structured engagement between the Retail Sector and relevant Government Departments/bodies. Its purpose is to allow key issues of relevance to the sector to be discussed, with a view to identifying practical actions which could be taken by Government, or by industry itself, to support the sector. I have also met with other representatives of employers and employees and the response 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 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 assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19. The feedback I received from engagement with business and sectoral representatives since this crisis began enabled me to gain an insight into the difficulties faced by businesses. The supports are accordingly 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/>.

In April of this year, I opened applications for a new €2 million COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme to support indigenous Irish retailers to sustain their business through the crisis and into the future. It is one of two online trading schemes that has received additional funding to support firms in this difficult period.

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 re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant is 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 grant is equivalent to the rates bill of the business in 2019, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment of €10,000. If a company is currently in a rateable premises but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities and further information is available on the application form. If there are queries that are not ad-

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dressed on the application form, businesses can contact the Business Support Unit in each local authority. All information including the application form is available on the appropriate local authority website, the details of which are at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/942f74-local-authorities/>.

In addition to the range of business supports which are being administered by the agencies under the aegis of my Department, I am aware that sector specific actions are also being taken by my Ministerial colleagues. The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Mr Shane Ross T.D. and Minister of State for Tourism and Sport, Mr Brendan Griffin T.D. announced on the 20th May the formation of a special Tourism Recovery Taskforce with an Independent Chair, dedicated to spearheading economic recovery for the tourism sector. Earlier, on 3rd April, a range of specific measures to support the artistic and cultural life of the nation at this difficult time, with a particular focus on wellbeing through personal and community creativity, was announced by the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Ms Josepha Madigan T.D.

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

468. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if her Department or the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government has lead authority for the restart grant; and the budget allocation to the scheme and other individual Department allocations. [8078/20]

469. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if the eligibility criteria for the recently announced restart grant for small businesses will be re-examined (details supplied); and if the scheme will be reviewed to ensure that trades persons and entrepreneurs working from their home offices can access the grant scheme. [8079/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 468 and 469 together.

On Friday, May 15th, 2020 the Government announced details of the new €250m Restart Grant providing direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant is funded by my Department and is being administered via local authorities from Friday May 22nd, 2020.

Eligible businesses who have stayed open throughout the crisis, as well as those who are reopening under Phase 1 (from 18th May) and Phase 2 (8th June) of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, are encouraged to apply first for the Restart Grant. These applications will be prioritised for payment by the local authorities.

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To avail of the Restart Grant, applicants must be a commercial business and 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 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 retain employees that are on The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme.

Subject to the qualifying criteria outlined above, any business that has a commercially rateable premises including those businesses with outstanding rates bills are eligible to make an application if they meet the criteria. The grant will be the amount of the rates demand in respect of calendar year 2019 only, subject to a minimum of €2,000 and a maximum of €10,000.

If a company is currently in a rateable premise but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities since Friday May 22nd and further information on the Grant can be obtained by contacting the Business Support Unit of the relevant local authority.

EU Regulations

470. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if there is a mechanism to screen foreign investment here being considered by her Department in view of the way the Covid-19 crisis has underlined the importance of protecting strategic assets, for example, life sciences including medical research and pharmaceutical ingredients; and if proposals are being examined to introduce an investment screening mechanism to safeguard critical national assets and technology in the current crisis which would require primary legislation. [8081/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Ireland is one of approximately 13 EU Member States that do not currently have a formal Investment Screening mechanism in place. However, the issues around any possible Irish mechanism are currently under active consideration.

An EU Regulation on Investment Screening is due to take effect from 11 October 2020. The aim of the Regulation is to establish a cooperation framework within the European Union for the screening of foreign direct investments.

The Regulation is a response to growing concerns within Europe about the potential acquisition of, and investment in, strategic European companies by foreign-owned firms that may undermine a Member State's security or public order.

As the Deputy notes, Investment Screening has recently assumed greater political focus both globally and within Europe as a result of Covid-19. The EU is concerned that strategic

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European investments are currently experiencing severe economic vulnerability and low share prices and could be vulnerable to being acquired by third countries. As such, Investment Screening has been the subject of recent Guidance from the Commission calling upon Member States that already have an existing screening mechanism in place to make full use of tools available to them under EU and national law to prevent capital flows from non-EU countries that could undermine Europe's security or public order. In the Guidance, the Commission also calls on the remaining Member States to look at establishing a fully-fledged screening mechanism.

While the EU Regulation provides a framework for cooperation through which Member States and the European Commission can exchange information and raise specific concerns about a potential foreign investment, it does not require Member States to adopt or maintain a screening mechanism for foreign direct investment. It does, however, contain a number of mandatory requirements - including a requirement to nominate national contact points in each Member State and to comply with certain annual reporting requirements.

As I indicated in my response to the Deputy's earlier question on Investment Screening on 27 April last, in advance of the Regulation taking effect in October, my Department has already established a dedicated Unit, the Investment Screening Unit comprising of 2.5 staff members. This Unit has been notified to the European Commission as the designated national contact point for Ireland. The Unit will undertake and fulfil the cooperation and reporting obligations under the Regulation and is also developing a range of policy options for consideration by Government.

As part of this ongoing work on investment screening, my Department has established and chairs an interdepartmental group comprising key Departments that are likely to have an interest in the screening of Investments. A range of bilateral consultations on Investment Screening have also been held with key stakeholders and Government agencies, and the models employed in range of other countries are being examined by officials.

Any formal screening mechanism would need to be designed and tailored so that is appropriate to Ireland's needs while also meeting our obligations under the EU Regulation. In particular, any mechanism would need to balance Ireland's continued attractiveness as a location for inward investment, with a robust, but proportionate Investment Screening Mechanism that protects security and public order.

A proposal to introduce a screening mechanism would require a Government decision and would also require the introduction of domestic legislation in this regard. As noted, it is intended to bring proposals in this regard before a new Government, when formed, outlining the policy options and the legislative requirements needed to introduce any formal Screening mechanism.

In the meantime, to further build on our analysis and research, and to ensure that the policy options presented to Government are as comprehensive as possible, my Department undertook a public consultation on Investment Screening. This consultation affords an opportunity to all interested stakeholders to contribute to the development of policy in this area. This closing date for submissions has just passed and officials are currently reviewing the content received.

Covid-19 Pandemic

471. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when casual traders can return to work. [8100/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business sets out five stages for unlocking

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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. 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 re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. The Restart Grant is 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 grant is 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 Supports

472. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the supports in place to benefit bus and coach operators that are parked up as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. [8101/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): 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/>.

The full range of Enterprise Ireland, 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.

For bus and coach operators, 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 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.

These measures are in addition to the €150m of funding capacity in the Government's Credit Guarantee Scheme, which is available to bus and coach operators.

For microenterprises (under 10 employees), Microfinance Ireland (MFI) are administering special COVID-19 Loans, with an additional €13m in capital support bringing its total lend-

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ing 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.

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 your particular business.

Covid-19 Pandemic

473. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the position regarding plans to allow persons over 70 years of age who are deemed medically fit for work to be allowed to return to work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8104/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Government policy is to protect those over 70 years and those extremely medically vulnerable by minimising interaction between them and others. This means that those who are over 70 years of age and those extremely medically vulnerable have been advised to stay at home and within their homes and to minimise all non-essential contact with other members of their household who are not cocooning themselves. This policy is being implemented to protect those who are at very high risk of severe illness from COVID-19 from coming into contact with the virus.

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.

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 (NPHET). The community health measures that have been relaxed together with 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.

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.

Question No. 474 answered with Question No. 446.

Job Losses

475. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the steps she has taken, including meetings or correspondence with management and staff at a company (details supplied) and the IDA or other relevant parties, to save the jobs at risk; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8139/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): 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

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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.

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.

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.

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.

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 Supports

476. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her plans to increase the funding available under the restart grant for small businesses in view of the scale of the financial difficulties facing SMEs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8140/20]

477. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if alternative methods of calculating the restart grant funding needs of businesses will be considered; her views on whether refunding 2019 rates bills does not reflect the restart funding needs of a given business; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8141/20]

478. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the way in which microbusinesses that do not pay rates can access restart grant funding. [8142/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 476 to 478, inclusive, together.

On Friday May 15th, 2020 the Government announced details of the new €250m Restart Grant providing direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs asso-

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ciated with reopening and re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures; with the grant being administered by local authorities from Friday, May 22nd, 2020.

Eligible businesses who have stayed open throughout the crisis, as well as those who are reopening under Phase 1 (from 18th May) and Phase 2 (8th June) of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, are encouraged to apply first for the Restart Grant. These applications will be prioritised for payment by the local authorities.

To avail of the Restart Grant, applicants must be a commercial business and 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 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 retain employees that are on The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme.

Subject to the qualifying criteria outlined above, any business that has a commercially rateable premises including those businesses with outstanding rates bills are eligible to make an application if they meet the criteria. The grant will be the amount of the rates demand in respect of calendar year 2019 only, subject to a minimum of €2,000 and a maximum of €10,000.

If a company is currently in a rateable premise but was not rate-assessed in 2019 it is still eligible to apply. The local authority can pay the grant based on an estimate of what the rates demand for 2019 would have been.

The grant will be the amount of rates demand in respect of calendar year 2019 only, subject to a minimum of €2,000 and a maximum of €10,000.

Within the funding available, the priority has been to support those who have suffered most, including closure of the business, but who will still have incurred ongoing costs.

The grant can be used to defray ongoing fixed costs, for replenishing stock and for measures needed to ensure employee and customer safety.

Businesses who are not in a rateable premises are not eligible.

Non-commercial organisations such as community and sporting premises are not eligible. Businesses that do not operate from rateable premises (tradesmen, service providers, etc) are not eligible.

I understand the concerns relating to business that do not operate from commercial premises.

However, tradespersons and service providers that operate on a mobile basis or that could continue to work remotely have been better placed to continue to trade and many don't have the same levels of losses, of ongoing overheads or reopening costs that a fixed premises business will have. Within the funding available, the priority has been to support those who have suffered most, including closure of the business, but who will still have incurred ongoing costs.

We are also focussed on businesses that have continued to employ people, with the aid of the Temporary Wage Support Scheme, so that those jobs will be retained as soon as the business re-opens.

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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.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities since Friday May 22nd, 2020 and further information can be obtained by contacting the Business Support Unit of the relevant local authority.

We will monitor the Restart Grant as it is rolled out and continue to take on board issues as they arise.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

479. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if the credit guarantee scheme will be amended to ensure that loans are available to SMEs to address Covid-19-related financial difficulties. [8143/20]

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 2nd, 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 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.

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.

Enterprise Support Services

480. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the loan schemes available to SMEs that allow them to borrow at 0% interest rates; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8144/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The loan schemes that have been put in place by my Department have been designed to achieve the widest reach with Exchequer funding in as fast a time as possible as one part of a suite of support measures for businesses impacted by COVID 19. Loan guarantee structures are a very effective response to the liquidity crisis, in particular where it is feasible to access counter-guarantees through the European Investment Bank [EIB].

There are significant advantages to operating loan guarantee schemes through participating financial providers. This allows the Government to leverage existing commercial lending infrastructure to provide an efficient mechanism for making competitive lending products available to Covid-19-impacted businesses. The guarantee structure ensures that eligible applicants to the schemes represents a reduced risk to the participating lender, which in turn ensures access to appropriate financing for more businesses.

However, the operation of these loan schemes through the financial providers also means that interest is a feature of the loans, as some interest must be charged by the lenders to cover overheads and capital costs if they are to continue to work with Government.

That said, the interest rates on the MFI Covid-19 loan scheme have been reduced from the interest rates of 6.8-7.8% typically offered by the MFI to a lower rate of 4.5-5.5%. The interest rate of 4% under the Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme represents a savings when compared with other similar lending available in the market, while the availability of loans of under €500,000 unsecured ensures that the scheme is more accessible to businesses.

Across the EU, different member states have prioritised different features of their respective liquidity supports to businesses, and so a direct comparison may not be appropriate. However, from the data available, Ireland's loan guarantee schemes appear to be in line with many countries: they cover 80% of the loan value, at commercial or slightly lower rates.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

481. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if grant funding will be made to cafés and restaurants wishing to operate takeaway services for signage, screens and other equipment to facilitate social distancing; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8185/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): On Friday May 15th, 2020 the Government announced details of the new €250m Restart Grant providing direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with reopening and re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures; with the grant being administered by local authorities from Friday May 22nd, 2020.

The scheme 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 associated with re-launching the business.

Eligible businesses who have stayed open throughout the crisis, as well as those who are reopening under Phase 1 (from 18th May) and Phase 2 (8th June) of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, are encouraged to apply first for the Restart Grant. These applications will be prioritised for payment by the local authorities.

To avail of the Restart Grant, applicants must be a commercial business and be in the Local Authorities Commercial Rates Payment System and:

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1. have an annual turnover of less than €5m and employ between 1 to 50 people;
2. have 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 retain employees that are on The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme.

Subject to the qualifying criteria outlined above, any business that has a commercially rateable premises including those businesses with outstanding rates bills are eligible to make an application if they meet the criteria. The grant will be the amount of the rates demand in respect of calendar year 2019 only, subject to a minimum of €2,000 and a maximum of €10,000.

Applications for the Restart Grant can be made online directly to local authorities from Friday May 22nd, 2020 and further information can be obtained by contacting the Business Support Unit of the relevant local authority.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

482. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her views on establishing a rental support scheme for small and medium-sized enterprises adversely affected by the Covid-19 emergency similar to that provided to private home renters. [8200/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The issues businesses are facing in respect of commercial rents has 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 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 re-

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sponses 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 received a response on 13th May 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 business 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 (see further information below);

- 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.

The issue of supporting fixed costs, including commercial rents, was very much to the fore of our minds when the Government recently introduced the Restart Grant which will give direct grant aid to micro and small businesses to help them with the costs associated with re-opening and re-employing workers following COVID-19 closures. 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.

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, with a minimum payment of €2,000 and a maximum payment

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of €10,000.

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

483. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if she has met an organisation (details supplied) to discuss the way in which its industry will safely reopen; and if not, her plans to do so in the near future. [8225/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I met with the organisation concerned by way of Conference Call today, Wednesday 20 May.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

484. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation her views on the reluctance of banks to loan to SMEs in order for them to commence the process of reopening their businesses in accordance with social distancing guidelines; and the grants that will be made available to the hospitality sector to ensure the industry can maintain itself as the Covid-19 crisis abates while the economic conditions remain precarious. [8226/20]

Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government has worked to put in place a suite of supports to encourage lending through the banks to SMEs, the following supports are available to all eligible business, including the hospitality sector.

The Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme and the Future Growth Loan Scheme both leverage counter-guarantees through the European Investment Bank to provide a significant guarantee to banks on loans to eligible businesses, reducing the risk associated with such lending. On 8 April I announced significant expansions to both schemes.

On 2 May, I announced a new €2bn Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme. 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. The guarantee can be used for a wide range of lending products between €10,000 and €1 million that have a maximum term of six years. The guarantee structure will reduce the risk exposure to the bank and open up lending which banks may otherwise have considered to be too high a risk.

The Pillar Banks have assured me that they will support businesses through the Covid-19 Crisis, and I continue to meet with them regularly to make sure they are delivering as such. The banks have had to deal with an overwhelming increase in activity since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis and this may have caused some delays in dealing with new business loans leading to a perceived reluctance to lend. While the State supported loan guarantee schemes provide risk coverage to the banks, banks do have an obligation to undertake credit assessment of the loans applied for according to their own policy and procedures. In these uncertain times, this poses many complexities.

I must highlight also that for micro-enterprises that have not achieved lending through the

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banks, application for a loan through Micro Finance Ireland could be considered. 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.

In addition, the newly launched €250m Restart Grant allows for direct grant aid to micro and small businesses of between €2,000 and €10,000. Application forms now available online on all local authority websites. The grant is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers.

To qualify for the Restart Grant, a business must

- have a turnover of less than €5m and have 50 or less employees.
- have suffered a projected 25%+ loss in revenue from 1st April 2020 to 30th June 2020.
- commit to remain open or to reopen if it was closed. The business must also declare the intention to retain employees that are benefitting from the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS).

The COVID-19 outbreak will result in a serious downturn in the Irish, EU and wider global economy. To assist companies to respond to these challenges, and in doing so stabilise and rebuild their business, Enterprise Ireland, on behalf of the Department of Business Enterprise and Innovation has launched a new suite of COVID-19 supports; these are:

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.

Sustaining Enterprise Fund – Small Enterprise: 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.

A 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. 337 applications have been received for Covid-19 Business Financial Planning Grant.

- Lean Business Continuity Voucher: A €2.5k voucher for eligible companies to access

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training or advisory services support related to the continued operation of their business during the current pandemic. 156 applications have been received for the LEAN Business Continuity Voucher.

- **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.

A wide range of financial supports and guidance has been made available by my Department and wider Government to help businesses impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Full details of all supports and guidance is available at <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>

It is important to check <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/c36c85-covid-19-coronavirus/> for the latest information, public health advice and guidelines from Government in relation to Covid-19.

Covid-19 Pandemic

485. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health when a person who teaches music on a one-to-one basis can return to work (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7090/20]

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.

National Maternity Hospital

486. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if the land earmarked for the development of the new national maternity hospital will be owned by the State or by a charitable organisation and leased by the State (details supplied); if it is leased, the terms and duration of the lease; the implications of the potential expiry of such a lease in respect of value for money in capital expenditure and security of national infrastructure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7136/20]

502. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health the procurement process for land earmarked for the new national maternity hospital; if an organisation (details supplied) has transferred the land to the State or to a charitable organisation; if the process will result in the State having full ownership of the land or leasehold; if it is leased, the terms and duration of such lease; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8223/20]

519. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health his views on the recent transfer of land earmarked for the development of the new national maternity hospital by an organisation (details supplied); if the land will be owned by the State or owned by an organisation and leased by the State; if it is leased, the terms and duration of the lease; and if the organisation will have a mandate or influence in respect of the ethos of the hospital. [7140/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 486, 502 and 519 together.

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 for a period of 99 years. 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.

487. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health if a matter raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) will receive a response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7294/20]

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.

Guidance in relation to specific sectors of the economy should in the first instance be sought from the Government Department with responsibility for that sector.

Commencement of Legislation

488. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health when Part 8 of the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 (details supplied) will be commenced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7461/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Part 8 of the Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) Act 2015 provides a legislative framework for Advanced Healthcare Directives

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(AHDs). An AHD is a statement made by a person with capacity setting out his or her will and preferences regarding treatment decisions that may arise in the future when he or she no longer has capacity.

My Department remains committed to commencing these provisions as soon as possible. The development of a code of practice to accompany the AHD provisions is a key piece of work to facilitate commencement. The AHD multidisciplinary working group which I established in 2016 has developed a code of practice for Part 8 and submitted it to the Director of Decision Support Services in December 2018 for consideration. When this has been finalised by the Director it will be submitted to me for approval prior to publication.

However, while Part 8 of the Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) Act 2015 is yet to be commenced, advanced healthcare directives has been established by the Irish courts. I would also refer the Deputy to the HSE's National Consent Policy 2019 which covers situations concerning consent to DNAR (do not attempt resuscitation), and the recently published HSE guidance regarding Cardio-Pulmonary resuscitation and DNAR decision making during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Human Rights

489. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he will conduct a human rights impact assessment of the Covid-19 emergency powers (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7554/20]

532. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Health if a human rights impact assessment will be carried in regard to the Covid-19 emergency powers. [7307/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 489 and 532 together.

The purpose of the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A-Temporary Restrictions)(Covid-19) Regulations 2020 is to limit the spread of Covid-19 to protect the health of all persons and to save lives. The restrictions imposed on movement and events (gatherings) are consistent with the recommendations of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and have regard to the immediate, exceptional and manifest risk posed to human life and public health by the spread of Covid-19. I believe these restrictions represent a necessary and proportionate response to an unprecedented situation. We have now however moved to a new stage where easing of restrictions has begun. The Regulations were recently amended to extend their date of operation until 8 June 2020 and, in line with public health advice and the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, to provide for the limited lifting of some of the restrictions imposed by them. As we move forward with further easing of restrictions it is important to keep in mind the on-going threat that Covid-19 represents, taking care to ensure that any loosening of restrictions is on the basis of medical guidance and advice. We must also continue to keep in mind human rights and civil liberty issues and I have asked my officials to ensure that there is continued consideration of these issues as the next stage of easing restrictions proceeds.

Covid-19 Pandemic

490. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health the details regarding the proposed mandatory 14-day quarantine period for international travellers arriving here; the date by which

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this measure is intended to be introduced; the date by which the measure is to be reviewed; if the measure is applicable to travellers arriving from all destinations outside of the island of Ireland; and the possible end date for such a measure. [7580/20]

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 progress towards 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, the public health advice for passengers arriving into the State from overseas is to self-isolate for 14 days.

From 28th May, it will be a legal requirement for passengers arriving from overseas to complete a COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form. The information on the form may be used to assist our contact tracing teams.

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 would 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. Any mandatory arrangements would be kept under regular review.

There is ongoing close engagement at political and official levels between my Department and the authorities in both Northern Ireland and the UK. These close contacts will continue over the coming weeks.

Complimentary measures applying to international travel, such as temperature testing at airports, will remain under consideration but are not envisaged at this time.

Covid-19 Pandemic

491. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health when employees that are cocooning may be advised to return to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7584/20]

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

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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.

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

492. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the reason Ireland is enforcing a 2 m social distancing limit for restaurants, cafés, pubs and so on while reopening in view of the fact the World Health Organization suggest a 1.5 m distance and many European countries such as France and Italy are able to proceed with only 1 m distancing between consumers and Germany and Norway are enforcing 1.5 m distancing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7723/20]

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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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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.

While the evidence relating to the SARS-CoV-2 virus is evolving, it is clear now that the risks of transmission of any respiratory pathogens such as the type that causes Covid-19 are lessened when greater distance is maintained between people. This evidence is kept under review by the National Public Health Emergency Team on a continuing basis.

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.

Guidance in relation to specific sectors of the economy should in the first instance be sought from the Government Department with responsibility for that sector.

Covid-19 Pandemic

493. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the UK Government has recently announced it is making travel from Ireland exempt from the 14-day quarantine requirement after travelling by air; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7823/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): NPHE has considered issues in relation to overseas travel, informed by World Health Organisation and European Centre for Disease

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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 progress towards 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, the public health advice for passengers arriving into the State from overseas is to self-isolate for 14 days.

From 28th May, it will be a legal requirement for passengers arriving from overseas to complete a COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form. The information on the form may be used to assist our contact tracing teams.

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 would 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. Any mandatory arrangements would be kept under regular review.

There is ongoing close engagement at political and official levels between my Department and the authorities in both Northern Ireland and the UK. These close contacts will continue over the coming weeks.

Complimentary measures applying to international travel, such as temperature testing at airports, will remain under consideration but are not envisaged at this time.

Covid-19 Pandemic

494. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health when an organisation (details supplied) will be able to reopen in line with the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7843/20]

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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- 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.

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.

Guidance in relation to specific sectors of the economy should in the first instance be sought from the Government Department with responsibility for that sector.

Covid-19 Pandemic

495. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the stage of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business during which busking can reconvene in public spaces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7854/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): 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,

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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

496. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health if the restrictions that will be necessary in order that weddings can proceed, for example, the number, social distancing and so on will be clarified in view of the fact that between 20 May and the end of 2020 there are close to 15,000 weddings planned here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7871/20]

498. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health his plans to publish guidelines for those organising weddings in the coming months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7920/20]

500. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health if advice will be provided for couples planning a wedding in September and October 2020 in view of the publication of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Businesses as a result of Covid-19; the number of guests that will be permitted at that stage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8049/20]

539. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Health if social gatherings specifically weddings are permitted to proceed as normal from 10 August 2020 as outlined in phase 5 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7425/20]

541. **Deputy Hildegard Naughton** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons that constitute a small wedding; the number of persons that constitute a large wedding under the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; the social distancing rules that apply to a large wedding in view of the uncertainty in relation to persons wishing to marry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7430/20]

610. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide clarification in respect of the number of attendees allowed at weddings held after phase 5 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business in which it states some larger social gatherings can take place, for example, weddings, these will be restricted due to the risks involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8033/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 496, 498,

500, 539, 541 and 610 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:

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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.

My Department will not be providing detailed guidance in relation to weddings.

Guidance in relation to events in specific sectors of the economy should in the first instance be sought from the Government Department with responsibility for that sector.

Covid-19 Pandemic

497. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health when nail technicians who work from home will be able to reopen their businesses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7892/20]

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

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- e. An assessment of the risk of secondary morbidity and mortality as a consequence of the restrictions.

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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. 498 answered with Question No. 496.

Covid-19 Pandemic

499. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health if beauty salons are included in the businesses that are scheduled to reopen on 20 July 2020; if there will be restrictions on the type of skincare treatments that can be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7923/20]

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.

Guidance in relation to business activities in specific sectors of the economy should in the first instance be sought from the Government Department with responsibility for that sector.

Question No. 500 answered with Question No. 496.

Covid-19 Pandemic

501. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the phase in which psychotherapy practices will be able to reopen in accordance with the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8053/20]

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)) psychotherapy 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).

Question No. 502 answered with Question No. 486.

Covid-19 Pandemic

503. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the steps he is taking to ensure the provision of PPE for dental practices and financing the structural changes required to comply with new Dental Council guidelines. [7050/20]

522. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health if he will work with the Ministers for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Finance and Employment Affairs and Social Pro-

tection to formulate an action plan to safeguard the future of the dental profession and introduce measures (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7149/20]

534. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Health the supports being put in place for dentists; if the HSE will provide appropriate PPE for all dentists, including those that are treating adults; if he has considered the financial issues that apply at present for dentists that cannot trade and may not be in a position to operate in the coming weeks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7349/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 503, 522 and 534 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. 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 including a Restart grant for which application can be made on line to local authorities. 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.

Dental Services

504. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the steps he is taking to ensure that all adults are afforded access to the public emergency dental centres being operated by the HSE in view of the fact current arrangements are only in place for children and persons with special needs. [7051/20]

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 of the HSE; to the self-employed and retired people who have the required number of social insurance (PRSI) contributions through the Dental Treatment Benefit Scheme of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection; 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 Sur-

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veillance 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.

Hospital Acquired Infections

505. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health the number of MRSA cases reported to the HSE in hospitals from January to April 2020. [7065/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As this is an operational matter the Question has been referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for answer and direct reply to the Deputy.

Health Services Funding

506. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health if funding will be available for community drug teams to access PPE equipment and for premises redesign to allow for physical distancing and risk assessments. [7066/20]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

507. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health when ENT outpatient departments will be reopening. [7067/20]

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 trajectory of the disease means there is now an opportunity for increasing the provision of non-covid care including more routine care.

The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) has approved a number of recommendations relating to protecting and maximising the delivery of essential time-critical non-Covid-19 care alongside Covid-19 care. On 5 May, NPHE agreed that its recommendation of 27 March, in regard to the pausing of all non-essential health services should be replaced, in relation to acute care, with a recommendation that delivery of acute care be determined by appropriate clinical and operational decision making. Application of the essential risk mitigating steps set out in the guidance developed under the auspices of the NPHE Expert Advisory group will have operational implications, which will impact on throughput. The HSE is currently engaging with hospital groups to assess the impact of these guidelines on activity. The completion of this work should enable non-urgent elective care to resume within the necessary constraints, including ENT appointments and procedures.

My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working

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together to estimate the impact of Covid 19 on Scheduled Care waiting lists, with a view to informing activity going forward. 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 and progress the provision of more routine non Covid-19 care.

Where possible, hospitals are working to provide services in a different way, which includes virtual clinics for some out-patient department appointments. The HSE website provides details on services currently available and operational in each hospital on its website. This information is reviewed frequently and provides up-to-date announcements on services available at each site (<https://www2.hse.ie/services/hospital-service-disruptions/hospital-service-disruptions-covid19.html>).

Nursing Home Accommodation

508. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health when the provision of new and upgraded accommodation at a health facility (details supplied) will progress to the next stage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7075/20]

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

509. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health if 20 July 2020 is the designated date for reopening of self-catering holiday accommodation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7076/20]

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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2. It will also provide risk-based public health advice on what measures could be modified in the next period.

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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.

Guidance in relation to specific sectors of the economy should in the first instance be sought from the Government Department with responsibility for that sector.

Covid-19 Pandemic

510. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the statistics regarding contact tracing since the first case of Covid-19; the operation infrastructure behind the contact tracing process; and the details of referencing the chronological connection between positive test results and follow-up contact tracing in tabular form. [7082/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Primary Care Centres

511. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the status of the provision of new primary healthcare facilities in Clondalkin and Rowlagh, Dublin 22; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7085/20]

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 Tests

512. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health his plans to use medical detection dogs in the fight against Covid-19 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7093/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I have no plans in this regard.

Covid-19 Pandemic

513. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding a hospital. [7099/20]

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 Tribunals

514. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health the number of orders made pursuant to section 18(4)(a) and or (b) of the Mental Health Act 2001 as amended; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7121/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): The temporary amendments made to the Mental Health Act, 2001 under the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 included changes to section 18(4) of the 2001 Act.

Section 18(4) sets out how mental health tribunals can be adjourned for an initial period of 14 days by either the tribunal or the patient. Under the 2001 Act, an additional adjournment of 14 days can be requested by the patient, if the tribunal agrees it is in the interest of the patient and if the relevant admission or renewal order will still be in force by the end of expiration of the adjournment.

The temporary measures introduced in the 2020 Act retain the existing provisions in section 18(4), but also allow for the tribunal to initiate the additional adjournment if it is necessary to do so due to the exigencies of the public health emergency, while having due regard for the interests of the patient.

As of 15 May 2020, there were six adjournments under section 18(4), as amended. During the same period in 2019, there were four adjournments under the regular section 18(4).

Mental Health Tribunals

515. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health the number of times a mental health tribunal of one member has been appointed pursuant to section 48(3)(a) of the Mental Health Act 2001 as amended; the number of times a mental health tribunal consisting of one member has sat; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7122/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): The Mental Health Commission has confirmed that as of 14 May, no one-person tribunals have taken place under the amended Act.

Under section 48 of the Mental Health Act, 2001, Mental health tribunals review the admission or renewal order of an involuntarily detained patient. Tribunals are comprised of three people (a chair, who is a solicitor or barrister, a consultant psychiatrist and a lay person.) In making its decision, a tribunal reviews the order, the patient's record, input from the patient or a legal representative, input from the patient's consultant psychiatrist and a report from an independent consultant psychiatrist, who examines the patient and interviews the responsible consultant psychiatrist.

The amendments to the 2001 Act, which were the result of detailed consultation by the Department with the Mental Health Commission and the HSE, were necessary to ensure that the rights of involuntarily detained patients under the 2001 Act would continue to be vindicated in the current public health emergency.

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The Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 introduced a “cascading” approach to provisions under section 48 of the 2001 Act. Under the new, temporary measures, every effort is made to maintain three-person tribunals, including remote working. However, in circumstances where three-person tribunals cannot take place due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, one-person tribunals, comprised of the Chairperson, are provided for. The amendments retain the key features of the tribunal process - independent legal representation, report by an independent consultant psychiatrist and an independent review of the patient’s detention.

Cancer Services

516. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health the estimated full year cost of providing ten additional chemotherapy slots per day in University Hospital Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7123/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Saolta Hospital Group advise that a number of improvements were made in University Hospital Galway in 2019 to streamline processes, thereby facilitating an increase in the number of chemotherapy slots per day from 16 to 22.

I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy in relation to the feasibility and estimated cost of providing further additional chemotherapy slots at the hospital.

Covid-19 Pandemic

517. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health when mental health practitioners may resume face-to-face patient consultations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7132/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): The COVID-19 Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business (Government of Ireland, 1 May 2020) is a living, flexible document and will be subject to regular review, in the context of the progression or suppression of COVID-19 in Ireland at different points in time, new guidance and evidence from the research, experience and findings of international bodies and of other countries and consideration of the utility and outcomes of taking particular measures. This public health-led approach is to inform a slow, gradual, step-wise and incremental reduction of the current social distancing measures, in a risk-based, fair and proportionate way, with a view to effectively suppressing the spread of COVID-19 while enabling the return of social and economic activity. Psychiatrists’, counsellors’ and psychotherapists’ work on essential cases can be considered part of essential Social Care services. Subject to adhering to the current public health guidelines around social distancing, it is up to the individual’s own judgement as to whether to meet clients face-to-face or through remote means. I fully appreciate that there is significant planning required for mental health practitioners to move to a new model of operating with the challenges of COVID-19. It is, however, the responsibility of employers (and self-employed people) to apply a risk-based approach to returning to work and to prepare to apply the precautions necessary to comply fully with public health advice.

I would also draw your attention to the Return to Work Safely Protocol, which was published by the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation on 9 May. This detailed guidance document was developed to assist employers and employees in the coming period. I would also note that other Government agencies have now been advised to consider developing sector-specific advice and guidance, where required.

Covid-19 Pandemic

518. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health when physical therapists may resume face-to-face patient consultations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7133/20]

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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- 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. 519 answered with Question No. 486.

Covid-19 Pandemic

520. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if the income and allowances of front-line nurses will be maintained at their current weekly levels if they are stood down from work due to close contact with Covid-19 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7144/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Detailed guidance and FAQs have been prepared and circulated by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in relation to payment for public servants while on special leave in relation to a COVID 19 related absences.

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As per the DPER FAQ document, where employees are eligible to receive special leave with pay while absent from work due to COVID-19, payment is based on basic salary and fixed allowances only and excludes unsocial hours premium payments. This applies to all public sector employees.

A copy of DPERs document is available to view publicly here:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/news/092fff-update-on-working-arrangements-and-leave-associated-with-covid-19-fo/>

Medical Aids and Appliances

521. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health if he will make the FreeStyle Libre device available to all type 1 diabetics under the long term illness scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7148/20]

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

Question No. 522 answered with Question No. 503.

Childcare Services

523. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if dentists and their assistants that have remained open to perform urgent treatment on patients and children are covered under the new childcare package for essential workers. [7156/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Several options to support essential workers who are parents and have childcare difficulties have been considered, and unfortunately none of the options are without their challenges in the current circumstances.

While the Temporary Childcare Scheme for Essential Health Workers that Dr Katherine Zappone, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs was to establish regrettably cannot proceed as planned, I understand that the HSE is engaging extensively with essential healthcare workers on flexible working arrangements to support their childcare responsibilities while enabling them to attend work (e.g. roster changes; flexible working hours etc).

Departmental Correspondence

524. **Deputy Stephen Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide the correspondence between the Chairperson of the HSE, the CEO of the HSE, the Secretary General of his Department and him pertaining to Covid-19 testing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7176/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The letters the Deputy is referring to were published on the website of the Department of Health on 14 May 2020 and are available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/aa1253-view-the-latest-correspondence-covid-19-department-of-health-hse/>

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

525. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the number of children waiting for a CAMHS appointment at 30 April 2020 or the latest date available in Cherry Orchard, Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7204/20]

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.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

526. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the number of children waiting for a CAMHS appointment at 30 April 2020 or the latest date available in each county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7205/20]

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.

Medical Cards

527. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health if it is permitted for general practitioners not to accept medical card patients; and if patients that pay privately for such general practitioners can be reimbursed for subsequent prescription charges. [7257/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Although GPs will ordinarily accept new patients who hold a medical or GP visit card on to their GMS panel, a GP may choose not to accept such a patient.

Additionally, the GMS GP contract stipulates that the maximum number of medical card or GP visit card patients that a GP can have on his/her panel is 2,000, or 2,200 if the GP also holds an under 6 contract, except in exceptional circumstances where the HSE decides to apply a higher limit. However, as of 1st of May 2020, only 7 of the 2,506 GMS contract holders in the country have reached or exceeded the 2,200 maximum patient limit.

Where a GMS patient experiences difficulty in finding a GP to accept him/her as a patient, the HSE has the power to assign that person to a GP's GMS patient list where the person has unsuccessfully applied to at least three GPs in the area who hold GMS contracts.

Medical card holders are liable to pay a prescription charge for prescribed medicines received without charge, with exemptions for certain medical card holders.

Hospital Facilities

528. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Health the purpose of the refurbishment works that are taking place in the Wicklow Municipal District Hospital, Wicklow Town, County Wicklow. [7264/20]

529. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Health the immediate and future plans for

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the Wicklow Municipal District Hospital, Wicklow Town, County Wicklow. [7265/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 528 and 529 together.

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.

Primary Medical Certificates

530. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health the reason a person (details supplied) cannot get their primary medical certificate completed in view of the fact it was granted to them in December 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7290/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): As the Deputy's question relates to a service matter, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply to the Deputy.

Covid-19 Tests

531. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the daily capacity for Covid-19 testing; the response time from test application to test to result; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7296/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The HSE, together with my Department and other bodies, has worked hard in the last two months to develop Ireland's testing and tracing process, to expand capacity and to reduce turnaround times, and significant progress has been made.

On 14 May the HSE published its Roadmap on Testing and Tracing which confirms capacity is now in place across the full testing pathway to test 15,000 people a day. The HSE advises that the time from referral to receiving an appointment is generally same day. The HSE also advises that the end-to-end median turnaround time from referral to the completion of contact tracing for positive results is now 2.3 days. The end-to-end median turnaround times from referral to result is 2 days or less.

I am confident that the HSE is putting in place the measures to further reduce turnaround times and we are seeing continuing improvement. The HSE continues to streamline the process and to automate where possible. A range of process optimisation measures are being put in place, including automated swab appointments; offering the option to receive positive test results by text and enabling out of hours referrals. These are in addition to measures already in place including IT improvement, automation processes, and streamlined transportation logistics.

Question No. 532 answered with Question No. 489.

Disability Support Services

533. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health the position of a child (details supplied) on the SAT list; and his plans to ensure they receive the help they need from the HSE and

for their education [7320/20]

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. 534 answered with Question No. 503.

Covid-19 Pandemic

535. **Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick** asked the Minister for Health if he has been briefed on the matter of hospital discharges into nursing homes (details supplied); if his attention has been drawn to specific evidence that Covid-19 was likely introduced into some nursing homes in this way; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7363/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): The HSE through the Health Protection Surveillance Centre has developed an extensive body of guidance and support tools to assist staff in long-term residential care facilities (LTRC), 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, 4 May 2020).

On the 10th March, the HSE issued preliminary guidance on the transfer of hospitalised patients from an acute hospital to a residential care facility in the context of the global COVID-19 epidemic.

The guidance, based on the best available information at the time, set out the various procedures to be followed, including:

- Patients with COVID-19 should not be transferred to an LTRC until they had two consecutive tests indicating virus not detected;

- Patients who were symptomatic and were contacts of a confirmed COVID-19 case should only transfer if the persons had a test indicating virus not detected and it was possible for that person to be isolated for the relevant incubation period;

- Patients who were asymptomatic and were contacts of a confirmed COVID-19 case should only transfer if it was possible for that person to be isolated for the relevant incubation period;

- Transfers from hospitals with no evidence of spread of COVID-19 should proceed as normal, except patients with respiratory tract infection meeting the then criteria for COVID-19 testing – in those cases testing should be carried out and the result should be virus not-detected before transfer.

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COVID-19 emerged first in China in December last and was first confirmed in Europe in January and since has spread widely and rapidly around the globe, disregarding borders, time zones, age and race. As a new virus, the world has been learning as the situation with the virus has evolved and new evidence becomes available.

The very infectious nature of the COVID-19 virus makes it difficult to prevent and control in residential care settings - an experience replicated internationally. Interrupting transmission of the COVID-19 virus is the main goal of public health measures and it is clear from our experience that the scale of effect of interruption of transmission is influenced by a number of factors. The most important way to protect our older population, whether living at home or in a LTRC setting, has been to reduce the amount of disease present in our community. If we can keep the rate of disease low this means that we protect both the staff and residents in LTRC. The transmission of the virus, particularly in respect of LTRCs is multifactorial and its introduction into any setting could be the result of a number of factors, including it being introduced unknowingly by asymptomatic residents or staff. This is why the substantial package of published guidance continues to evolve and be updated in line with new national and international evidence and guidance. Regular research is undertaken of national and international literature to ensure that the best available information and evidence is considered in this rapidly evolving environment.

Neuro-Rehabilitation Services

536. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health the status of the provision of care to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7381/20]

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

Covid-19 Pandemic

537. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health when he expects outpatient clinics for non-urgent procedures and assessments for children to reopen and accept clients; the impact there will be on waiting times for these services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7406/20]

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 Organization, 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

Questions - Written Answers

The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) has approved a number of recommendations relating to protecting and maximising the delivery of essential time-critical non-Covid-19 care alongside Covid-19 care. On 5 May, NPHE agreed that its recommendation of 27 March, in regard to the pausing of all non-essential health services should be replaced, in relation to acute care, with a recommendation that delivery of acute care be determined by appropriate clinical and operational decision making. Application of the essential risk mitigating steps set out in the guidance developed under the auspices of the NPHE Expert Advisory group will have operational implications, which will impact on throughput. The HSE is currently engaging with hospital groups to assess the impact of these guidelines on activity. The completion of this work should enable non-urgent elective care to resume within the necessary constraints, including paediatric appointments and procedures.

Where possible, hospitals are working to provide services in a different way, which includes virtual clinics for some outpatient department appointments. Children's Health Ireland (CHI) is amongst those hospitals that are engaging in the use of telehealth and virtual clinics to facilitate outpatient appointments. The HSE website provides details on services currently available and operational in each hospital on its website. This information is reviewed frequently and provides up-to-date announcements on services available at each site (<https://www2.hse.ie/services/hospital-service-disruptions/hospital-service-disruptions-covid19.html>).

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, including paediatric waiting lists, with a view to informing activity going forward. 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 and progress the provision of more routine non Covid-19 care.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

538. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Health his plans to ensure CAMHS is adequately resourced to deal with the increased strain on the mental health of young persons during the Covid-19 pandemic; and the extent to which he is liaising with the Department of Education and Skills in view of the exceptional pressure on leaving certificate students [7420/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): The development of all aspects of mental health services for young people, as reflected in the HSE Service Plan 2020, remains a priority for Government. Services have benefited from significant additional investment over recent years, which has resulted in an overall provision of €1.026 billion for HSE Mental Health this year. This represents an increase of €315m since 2012, and an increase of €39m over 2019. The additional €39m includes €13m for the continued rollout of new developments this year.

There are currently 71 Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) teams, 4 CAMHS inpatient units and 3 Paediatric Liaison Teams. Approximately 18,000 children were expected to be referred to the HSE CAMHS service this year, with around 11,000 expected to be seen by CAMHS professionals. In each region, individual cases professionally assessed as requiring urgent access to CAMHS received priority.

The HSE Service Plan 2020 aims to improve all aspects of mental health care, including the development of CAMHS inpatient and community-based services and their integration with Primary Care and increased access to talk therapies for young people. A new forensic CAMHS unit, the first of its kind nationally, has been built at the new National Forensic Mental Health

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complex at Portrane. This will provide specialist CAMHS care not previously available within our system.

The Department of Health has worked with the HSE to develop various e-Mental Health responses for CAMHS and other youth services. Approval was recently announced for the new *CAMHS Connect* service for the HSE West region, which will pave the way for a national roll-out of such a new system. The need for such an approach, and how we plan and deliver our mental health services overall in the future, has been highlighted by Covid-19 and has been prioritised by Government responses to date.

The Department of Health and the HSE, in collaboration with key cross-Government and cross-sectoral partners, has developed a new mental wellbeing campaign. This campaign, hosted on *gov.ie/together*, offers support and resources to help deal with stress, anxiety and isolation currently experienced by many people, including young people.

The Department of Health and the HSE will continue to work closely with the Department of Education to advise on enhanced mental health supports for young people. Detailed information in relation to the Leaving Certificate is available at <http://www.gov.ie/leavingcertificate>.

This site contains information on wellbeing supports for Leaving Certificate students. It includes a series of supports on managing wellbeing, coping with uncertainty, managing stress and anxiety, and has been developed by the National Educational Psychological Service. The webpage has links to more individualised support for students to access, should these be needed. The Department of Health has worked with the Department of Education and Skills and the HSE to ensure the most appropriate services and resources are clearly signposted for students.

The Government is satisfied that CAMHS and other youth mental health services are adequately resourced at this time but we will continue to keep the issues raised by the Deputy under close review.

Question No. 539 answered with Question No. 496.

Medical Aids and Appliances

540. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered procuring more sustainable PPE equipment that can be used more than once after proper laundering and disinfecting in view of the fact the Covid-19 pandemic will be here for some time, the cost of PPE equipment is expensive and the equipment is not always available [7428/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Most personal protective equipment (PPE) is designed for single use and immediate disposal so as to minimise the risk of spreading infection. However, this practice creates a number of issues in terms of cost, sustainability of supply, and environmental impact. With these issues in mind, the HSE is already investigating the possibility of procuring more sustainable PPE, such as reusable surgical gowns which can be sterilised between uses.

Question No. 541 answered with Question No. 496.

Hospital Appointments Status

542. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Health the status of a case of a person (details supplied); and when the person can expect an appointment with the neurosurgical de-

partment at Beaumont Hospital, Dublin. [7433/20]

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 Organization, 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.

General Practitioner Services

543. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health when the under-six general practitioner card age will be extended; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7438/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): On the 16th December 2019, the Government approved the drafting of legislation which, *inter alia*, would give effect to the Budget 2020 commitment to provide for the phased expansion of GP care without fees to all children aged 12 years and under. The initial stage of this phased expansion is the provision of GP care without fees to all children aged between 6 and 8 years. Substantial work has been undertaken by officials in this regard.

Medical Qualifications

544. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the way in which the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council, PHECC, plans to deal with EMT students during the Covid-19 period and going forward (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7440/20]

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Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council (PHECC) is the independent statutory body with responsibility for standards of education in pre-hospital emergency care. Its functions include the conduct of examinations leading to the award of NQEMT. Accordingly, the matter raised by the Deputy has been referred to PHECC for a direct response.

Hospital Appointments Status

545. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a hospital appointment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7447/20]

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 Organization, 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

546. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health if matters raised by a person (details supplied) in correspondence will receive a response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7473/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I can confirm that the correspondence was received in my Department. A response will issue to the Deputy in due course.

Covid-19 Pandemic

547. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health if he or his officials have engaged with a person (details supplied) regarding their advice on the significant need to upscale tracing and tracking here in order to avoid a second wave of the Covid-19 virus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7474/20]

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 Organization 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 reduce 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 a range of actions to achieve these targets.

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. The HSE advise that it now has the capacity to test 15,000 people a day and median turnaround times have continued to improve.

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 into 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 18 May shows Ireland ranks 4th highest out of 25 EU+UK countries in terms of tests completed as a percentage of the overall population.

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 last week, all close contacts of someone with Covid-19 will be automatically referred for testing. Our testing strategy will continue to be kept under review by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHEAT).

In relation to the specific question raised, I have not had any direct engagement with the person referred to and I'm not aware of any engagement with my officials.

Covid-19 Pandemic

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548. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if he will engage with the owners of a location (details supplied) to explore its potential as a use for pharmaceutical firms in their efforts to research treatment for Covid-19 [7479/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): This information has been shared with the Department of Health COVID-19 team who are managing and co-ordinating offers of assistance.

Covid-19 Pandemic

549. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients transferred from acute hospitals to a step down facility, nursing home, community nursing unit or other residential care facility during March 2020, in tabular form; the number of these patients that were tested for Covid-19 prior to transfer; the number of these patients that contracted Covid-19 after their transfer; the number of such patients that have now recovered; the number that died; and the equivalent data for April 2020. [7488/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The HSE through the Health Protective Surveillance Centre has developed an extensive body of guidance and support tools to assist in the management of COVID-19 cases, including in relation to decisions on transfer of patients/residents between care facilities 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, 04/05/2020.

The decision to discharge patients from hospital to nursing home settings is subject to clinical assessment. Discharges to nursing homes and other settings are a regular, daily feature of a functioning health system. The period from early March to mid-April saw an increase in the number of such discharged patients as the health system prepared itself for the expected ‘surge’ in COVID-19 cases. From an older person’s perspective, being admitted for longer than necessary increases the risk of a patient contracting a healthcare associated infection and/or deconditioning. The vast majority of these discharges took place from the 10th March onwards, when clear public health guidance was in place.

On the 10th March 2020, the HSE issued Interim Guidance on Transfer between Care Facilities, which included preliminary guidance on the transfer of hospitalised patients from an acute hospital to a residential care facility in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The guidance based on the best available information at the time set out the various procedures to be followed, including:

- Patients with COVID-19 should not be transferred to a LTRC until they had two consecutive tests indicating virus not detected.

- Patients who were symptomatic and were contacts of a confirmed COVID-19 case should only transfer if the persons had a test indicating virus not detected and it was possible for that person to be isolated for the relevant incubation period;

- Patients who were asymptomatic and were contacts of a confirmed COVID-19 case should only transfer if it was possible for that person to be isolated for the relevant incubation period;

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- Transfers from hospitals with no evidence of spread of COVID-19 should proceed as normal, except patients with respiratory tract infection meeting the then criteria for COVID-19 testing – in those cases testing should be carried out and the result should be virus not-detected before transfer.

With regard to the query raised in respect of numbers of patients, this data is not readily available to my Department but I will follow up with the HSE to seek further information.

Covid-19 Pandemic

550. **Deputy Mary Butler** asked the Minister for Health his plans to recommence Breast-Check which ceased during the Covid-19 pandemic; the procedures that will be put in place to protect both staff and patients; his further plans to deal with the backlog that occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7495/20]

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 Appointments Status

551. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) can expect an appointment with the audiology department at the Midland Regional Hospital, Tullamore, County Offaly. [7496/20]

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.

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

Nursing Homes Support Scheme

552. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Health when funding will be made available for the fair deal application by a person (details supplied) whose application has been approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7509/20]

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

553. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Health the phase under which speech and language and occupational therapists can reopen under the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7518/20]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

554. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the date on which his attention and the attention of the HSE was drawn to the movement of the 70 international protection applicants that were previously residing at a hotel (details supplied) to two other dedicated centres on 18 and 19 March 2020; the steps taken by him and the HSE on foot of their attention being drawn to same; and if he will provide a detailed report on the issue as a matter of urgency. [7520/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Responsibility for international protection applicants and the operation of the direct provision services referred to in the question are the responsibility of the Department of Justice and Equality. As part of the whole-of-government direct provision support system the Department of Justice and Equality provides accommodation, food and utilities to those seeking international protection in Ireland. The Department of Health and the HSE provide for the health care of applicants.

With the emergence of the COVID-19 crisis, the HSE prepared guidance for Homeless and other vulnerable group settings including Direct Provision settings, which can be found on www.hpsc.ie. This guidance is kept under review and updated as required. The guidance exists precisely because it is recognised that congregated settings such as Direct Provision centres present specific challenges in this pandemic.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of Justice and Equality and the HSE have worked closely together to ensure that the health and welfare of asylum seekers and refugees availing of the State's accommodation services are protected. In all matters related to the COVID-19 pandemic, public health advice from the HSE and the National Public Health Emergency Team is followed.

Questions - Written Answers

The HSE has put in place a range of measures to support Accommodation Centres operated by the Department of Justice and Equality to prevent and control Covid-19 issues in centres and to address any cases of COVID-19 if or when they arise. This includes provision for offsite self-isolation centres around the State.

I understand that the Department of Justice and Equality and the HSE continue to work closely together to support the health and welfare of international protection applicants availing of the State's accommodation services, including during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Both the Department of Justice and Equality and the HSE are committed to protecting the identity and medical confidentiality of residents, as required by law. For this reason, neither the Department nor the HSE will give specific information about individuals or locations. The health authorities will only comment on cases or outbreaks of any illness (Covid-19 or otherwise) if there is a Public Health reason to do so. The operational matters referred to are a matter for the HSE and I have referred the question to the HSE for response and direct reply.

Nursing Staff

555. Deputy Róisín Shortall asked the Minister for Health if additional recruitment for critical care staff has been planned; and the consideration given to the retention of existing staff to ensure the long-term sustainability of intensive care units in the context of the ongoing threat of Covid-19. [7550/20]

575. Deputy Joan Collins asked the Minister for Health his plans to implement the proposals of a society (details supplied) in relation to the expansion of recruitment and retention of critical care nurses. [7703/20]

605. Deputy Brendan Smith asked the Minister for Health his plans to increase critical care capacity with particular reference to the recruitment and retention of critical care nurses; if he will give further consideration to a submission by an association (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7981/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 555, 575 and 605 together.

The Health Service Capacity Review 2018 projected that demand for adult critical care beds will increase by 43% by 2031, and recommended that additional 190 critical care beds be put in place by 2031. My Department and the HSE continue to work together to address critical care capacity requirements, including intensive engagement in the context of responding to Covid-19. An updated workforce plan for critical care nursing is in development, under the auspices of the National Clinical Programme for Critical Care and my Department will continue to engage with the HSE in this regard.

Hospital Procedures

556. Deputy Anne Rabbitte asked the Minister for Health if partners can attend the birth of their child in Portiuncula Hospital; the restrictions in place for the birthing process in the hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7557/20]

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

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Mental Health Services

557. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health his plans to publish the review of A Vision for Change carried out during the term of the 32nd Dáil; his further plans for the implementation of recommendations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7560/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): The work of the revised mental health policy is complete. The final draft was agreed by cabinet Social Policy Committee in December 2019. The government must next review and approve the policy at which point the policy can then be published. This policy was developed following a process of research into international innovation and best practice in the field of mental health and an extensive national consultation of over 1,000 service users, family members, friends and carers, and other stakeholders. The revised policy contains an implementation roadmap that organises recommendations into short (0-6 months); medium (6-18 months) and long term (beyond 18 months) actions that will be costed within the various time frames allocated. The recommendations in the revised policy will be assessed as part of the annual estimates process, where the need for any additional funding will be considered.

Mental Health Services

558. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health his plans to retain all additional staff hired in the mental health services during the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7561/20]

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

559. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health the breakdown of all Covid-19 deaths recorded in the mental health services among prisoners waiting for transfer to the Central Mental Hospital and deaths of patients that contracted Covid-19 or were diagnosed while resident in a mental health setting, respectively in tabular form. [7562/20]

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.

Medical Cards

560. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health the date the medical card weekly income limit for persons over 70 years of age will be increased by €50 for a single person from €500 to €550 and by €150 for a couple from €900 to €1,050; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7593/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): On the 16th December 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. Substan-

tial work has been undertaken by officials in this regard.

Covid-19 Tests

561. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider conducting trials or contribute to the cost of trials to detect Covid-19 in a scenario (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7598/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I have no plans in this regard.

Disability Services Provision

562. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health if he will intervene with the relevant services in relation to the case of a person (details supplied). [7625/20]

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

Emergency Departments

563. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons that visited the accident and emergency department at Wexford General Hospital in 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [7631/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): According to HSE, there was a 21.1% reduction in Emergency Department (ED) attendances nationally this year up to the end of April 2020 compared to the same period last year. The number of attendances for patients in the over 75 age group also decreased by 15.8% nationally.

In relation to ED attendances at Wexford General Hospital, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

Covid-19 Tests

564. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the number of tests for Covid-19 carried out in County Wexford; and the number that were positive. [7632/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

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Abortion Services Provision

565. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health the basis for the 2018 estimate that three women per day use abortion pills which have been illegally imported; the information sources which were used to reach this estimate; the estimates compiled by his Department for the number of women using such pills in each of the years 2010 to 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7641/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the Deputy will be aware, both the Citizens' Assembly on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution and the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution heard evidence about the unsafe importation and use of abortifacient medications in this country during their deliberations in 2017. I was very clear at that time, and during the debates in the House of the Oireachtas, that it was essential that we did not continue to allow women to put their lives at risk through the use of unregulated, unsafe medications without medical supervision.

The Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution noted in its report that there was evidence of abortifacient medications being bought on the internet and used by women in this country without medical supervision. During its meetings, as the Deputy will be aware, the Joint Committee heard evidence from on the issue. Dr Abigail Aiken of the University of Texas gave evidence on research she conducted which indicated that between 1 January 2010 and 31 December 2015, 5650 women in Ireland requested medical termination of pregnancy through the online telemedicine service Women on Web. Dr Aiken also presented evidence on research she conducted on 1023 women from Ireland who completed terminations after they received medication from Women on Web between 1 January 2010 and 31 December 2012. Dr Aiken noted that her research included women from both this jurisdiction and from Northern Ireland.

In addition, there was evidence of abortifacient medications being bought online and imported into Ireland from the Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA). The HPRA is the competent authority responsible for the regulation of human medicines in Ireland; it employs enforcement actions, in cooperation with the Revenue Commissioners and An Garda Síochána, to identify the unauthorised supply of prescription-only medicines, including those containing abortifacients, to the public. The HPRA publishes figures each year on seizures of illegally imported medicines; in 2017, HPRA figures indicated that it detained 740 tablets containing misoprostal or mifepristone, while in 2016, 536 such tablets were detained.

Covid-19 Pandemic

566. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health when day care centres for the elderly or persons with disabilities will reopen in accordance with the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. [7664/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): The Department of Health and HSE are undertaking work to determine the current level of service delivery in the community and to set out plans, including associated required capacity, to resume services, including day services, in line with the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. This process will take on board the learning of the current period, including the possibility of delivering services in a new way, and the requirement to adhere to public health guidance.

This work will include an examination of how other countries have reintroduced, or plan to reintroduce, day services internationally.

Health Services

567. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health if matters raised in correspondence will be addressed (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5973/20]

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.

Maternity Services

568. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Health the locations of antenatal and maternity clinics in County Donegal in each of the years 2000 to 2020, in tabular form. [7696/20]

569. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE will reinstate antenatal and maternity services and clinics to Inishowen, County Donegal. [7697/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 568 and 569 together.

As this is a service issue, I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply to you directly.

Covid-19 Pandemic

570. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Health the reason the HSE advice on the wearing of masks changed for health workers caring for older persons over recent months. [7698/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): Appropriate evidence-based guidance to support the work of health and social care providers on a range of issues, including infection prevention and control, and the use of PPE has been developed by both the HSE and the HPSC and is updated regularly as appropriate and made available on their websites. The HPSC published updated guidance on the use of surgical face masks on 22 April and is now advising that surgical masks should be worn by healthcare workers, including home support workers. Updated guidance for health and social care workers who visit homes was published on the HPSC website on 24 April. This is available at www.hpsc.ie and advice for family carers is available on the website of Family Carers Ireland <https://familycarers.ie/coronavirus-covid-19-information-advice/>.

In relation to nursing homes, PPE is distributed by the HSE via a centralised request management system that services relevant healthcare settings, including hospitals, nursing homes (public and private), National Ambulance Service, GPs, and all Section 38 and 39 service providers. In line with NPHE recommendations all nursing homes have equality of access to PPE with all other services in line with clinical guidance. This centralised approach is in line with WHO guidance on coordinating PPE supply; WHO guidance also emphasises the need to ensure rational and appropriate use of PPE in view of the global shortage of such equipment.

Covid-19 Pandemic

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571. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health when private occupational therapists and private speech and language therapists can resume providing normal services to their clients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7699/20]

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)) occupational therapy services and speech and language therapy 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 Procedures

572. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Health if the partner of a woman in labour can attend the birth in University Hospital Galway; if an alternative person can attend if the partner is unable to attend; the advice being offered by the HSE for such cases in the hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7700/20]

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

Covid-19 Pandemic

573. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health when speech and language services for paediatrics and school aged children are allowed to recommence. [7701/20]

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

574. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Health when he expects persons requiring physiotherapy due to chronic pain will be able to attend their physiotherapist; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7702/20]

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.

Medical Cards

576. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if the medical card weekly income limit for persons over 70 years of age will be increased by €50 for a single person to €550 from €500 and by €150 for a couple to €1,050 from €900 from July 2020 as previously planned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7708/20]

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.

Hospital Staff

577. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health the status of plans to replace a person (details supplied) as a paediatric pain management consultant; the position in respect of this post; if his plans include an experienced replacement capable of continuing clinics and ensuring appointments and prescriptions do not lapse; if his plan also ensures immediate funding for a multidisciplinary team for pain management clinics in children's hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7728/20]

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

Primary Medical Certificates

578. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health the reason a person (details supplied) in County Donegal has been refused a primary medical certificate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7729/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath): As the Deputy's question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply to the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic

579. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if matters in relation to rostering and payments for nurses can be reviewed (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7730/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Detailed guidance and FAQs have been prepared and circulated by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in relation to payment for public servants while on special leave in relation to a COVID 19 related absences.

As per the DPER FAQ document, where employees are eligible to receive special leave with pay while absent from work due to COVID-19, payment is based on basic salary and fixed allowances only and excludes unsocial hours premium payments. This applies to all public sector

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employees.

A copy of DPERs document is available to view publicly here:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/news/092fff-update-on-working-arrangements-and-leave-associated-with-covid-19-fo/>.

General Practitioner Services

580. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE has engaged to re-open SouthDoc services in Fermoy and Mitchelstown, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7749/20]

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

Covid-19 Pandemic

581. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of the plan for the home support services staff that are waiting to be redeployed for Covid-19 crisis purposes; when these workers will be able to return to their jobs of supporting the elderly many of whom are living on their own; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7762/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy.

Health Services Staff

582. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Health the reason some posts in the HSE are confined to staff employed in the HSE, Tusla or other defined agencies despite the fact that better qualified and more suitable persons may apply from outside the defined organisations but are not considered for the posts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7775/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I have referred the Deputy's question to the HSE for direct reply.

Covid-19 Pandemic

583. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Health when paediatric occupational therapy clinics will be allowed to reopen. [7777/20]

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.

Proposed Legislation

Questions - Written Answers

584. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the status of the assisted human reproduction Bill following recent reports highlighting the impact of Covid-19 on surrogate families and babies. [7801/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the Deputy will be aware, the Government approved the drafting of a bill on assisted human reproduction (AHR) and associated areas of research, based on the published General Scheme of the Assisted Human Reproduction Bill. This comprehensive piece of legislation encompasses the regulation of a range of practices for the first time, including altruistic domestic surrogacy. The General Scheme also provides for the establishment of an independent regulatory authority for AHR.

Drafting of the bill is ongoing in conjunction with the Office of the Attorney General. It is not possible at this time to give a definitive timeline for the publication of the Bill and its subsequent passage through the Houses of the Oireachtas. However, the Deputy should be aware that I consider the progression of this legislation to be a priority.

It should be noted that the provisions within the General Scheme do not include the regulation of Irish citizens involved in international commercial surrogacy agreements in other countries. The Department of Justice and Equality published a guidance document in 2012 on citizenship, parentage, guardianship and travel document issues in relation to children born as a result of surrogacy arrangements entered into outside the State. The purpose of this document is to provide information to prospective intending parents on the steps necessary to ensure that a child born abroad through a surrogacy arrangement may enter and reside in the State and to secure the best interests of the child. This guidance document is available on the website of the Department of Justice and Equality.

However, there are clearly additional challenges arising from the global travel restrictions currently imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic which can impact upon individuals who have engaged in international surrogacy. Issues relating to overseas travel are matters for the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and I understand that his officials have been actively assisting and advising Irish citizens who find themselves, in the current circumstances, being prevented from, or experiencing difficulty in, travelling to and from this jurisdiction, and/or entering and exiting another jurisdiction.

Primary Care Services Provision

585. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health when diabetic and podiatry care will be provided in Summer Hill primary care centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7802/20]

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

Covid-19 Pandemic

586. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Health when chiropodists can reopen for business again; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7807/20]

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

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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)) podiatrists (also known as chiropodists) 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).

General Practitioner Services

587. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the long-running general practitioner vacancy in Newmarket-on-Fergus, County Clare. [7808/20]

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

Blood Donations

588. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the policy justification for the lifetime ban on donating blood for persons that previously had a gonorrhoea infection that is now cured; the way in which this compares to other EU countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7844/20]

589. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if he will review the 12-month blood donation ban for gay and bisexual men in view of the recent policy changes in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in which the ban has been reduced to three months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7845/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 588 and 589 together.

The Irish Blood Transfusion Service (IBTS) lifted its lifelong ban on men who have sex with men (MSM) from donating blood in January 2017, when the deferral policy was reduced to a period of one year following their last sexual encounter with a man.

The recent changes in deferral policy internationally have been noted by the IBTS.

The IBTS has advised that the changes in deferral policy for MSM internationally will be reviewed by an Advisory Group being established by the IBTS to review the evidence base for donor selection, deferral and exclusion in Ireland relating to social behaviours that may increase the risk of acquiring specific blood borne infections (HIV, HBV, HCV, syphilis and gonorrhoea).

Gonorrhoea is a serious sexually transmitted infection associated with populations with increased LGV, syphilis and HIV prevalence. As such, the IBTS has advised that it must be viewed as a marker of higher sexual risk-taking, which in a blood donor could pose an increased risk to the blood supply and to blood recipients. Accordingly, under the IBTS blood deferral policy, individuals who have ever had gonorrhoea are permanently excluded from donating blood.

The only data available to the IBTS for comparison was from the UK, who currently have a 12 month deferral policy in place for individuals who have completed treatment for Gonorrhoea.

Questions - Written Answers

The IBTS will continue to keep all deferral policies under active review in the light of scientific evidence, emerging infections and international experience.

Home Care Packages

590. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting for homecare packages by CHO area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7846/20]

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

591. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to cases of businesses that operate an appointment only, physical training facility (details supplied); and if his attention has been further drawn to the contention of the owners of the centres that phase 3 would be more appropriate in view of the fact they are more akin to behind closed door sports as set out in the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business due to their capacity to operate social distancing and regular cleaning of facilities by their staff. [7857/20]

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.

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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.

Guidance in relation to business activities in specific sectors of the economy should in the first instance be sought from the Government Department with responsibility for that sector.

Health Services Provision

592. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of the model of care report on lymphoedema and lipoedema treatment here; the details of the communications plan by the HSE for those affected by lymphoedema that cannot access treatment during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7862/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The HSE advise that the implementation of the model of care for lymphoedema and lipoedema in the proof of concept sites is on hold due to redeployment of staff arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. The early detection proof of concept project at the Mater Misericordiae University Hospital is tentatively planned to restart in June, depending on staff availability.

Guidelines for reopening lymphoedema services are being developed as part of the HSE recovery plan. This takes into consideration the use of telehealth when appropriate, while prioritising face to face contact for patients where necessary. The guidelines also support the restart of services at the proof of concept sites and the implementation of the wider roll-out of the model of care to ensure patient safety and reduced demand on acute services.

The HSE developed two patient information documents, in conjunction with Lymphoedema Ireland, to provide advice to those living with lymphoedema or lipoedema. These documents also included links to videos in relation to exercise programmes, simple lymphatic drainage and skin care.

The patient information documents were distributed to all HSE lymphoedema services and by members of Lymphoedema Ireland. The information is also available on the websites of the HSE and Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists.

Home Care Packages

593. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health if funding will be put in place to clear homecare waiting lists in order to keep persons at home during Covid-19; and the number of persons waiting for homecare packages. [7900/20]

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

594. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health the reason the Civil Defence

which was transporting swabs from designated areas to laboratories (details supplied) and to laboratories in University College Dublin on a voluntary basis has been replaced with a new company which will transport the swabs at a cost; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7901/20]

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

595. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the policy basis for moving patients without a Covid-19 status or with a Covid-19 positive status from acute hospitals to nursing homes rather than designated stepdown facilities while this is acknowledged within Covid protocols as a necessary risk; if the risk assessment used to justify this action will be published; the number of Covid-19 positive cases in nursing homes in cases in which the resident was transferred directly from an acute hospital setting; if the policy of transferring Covid-19 positive or Covid-19 status unknown patients to nursing homes will be reviewed in view of the scale of infection in nursing homes and in further view of the fact that this cohort of the population face the greatest risk of death from Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7908/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The HSE through the Health Protective Surveillance Centre has developed an extensive body of guidance and support tools to assist in the management of COVID-19 cases, including in relation to decisions on transfer of patients/residents between care facilities 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, 04/05/2020.

The decision to discharge patients from hospital to nursing home settings is subject to clinical assessment. Discharges to nursing homes and other settings are a regular, daily feature of a functioning health system. The period from early March to mid-April saw an increase in the number of such discharged patients as the health system prepared itself for the expected ‘surge’ in COVID-19 cases. From an older person’s perspective, being admitted for longer than necessary increases the risk of a patient contracting a healthcare associated infection and/or deconditioning. The vast majority of these discharges took place from the 10th March onwards, when clear public health guidance was in place.

On the 10th March 2020, the HSE issued Interim Guidance on Transfer between Care Facilities, which included preliminary guidance on the transfer of hospitalised patients from an acute hospital to a residential care facility in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The guidance based on the best available information at the time set out the various procedures to be followed, including:

- Patients with COVID-19 should not be transferred to a LTRC until they had two consecutive tests indicating virus not detected.

- Patients who were symptomatic and were contacts of a confirmed COVID-19 case should only transfer if the persons had a test indicating virus not detected and it was possible for that person to be isolated for the relevant incubation period;

- Patients who were asymptomatic and were contacts of a confirmed COVID-19 case should

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only transfer if it was possible for that person to be isolated for the relevant incubation period;

- Transfers from hospitals with no evidence of spread of COVID-19 should proceed as normal, except patients with respiratory tract infection meeting the then criteria for COVID-19 testing – in those cases testing should be carried out and the result should be virus not-detected before transfer.

With regard to the query raised in respect of numbers of positive cases, this data is not readily available to my Department but I will follow up with the HSE to seek further information.

Covid-19 Tests

596. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the number of meat plant staff that were tested as part of a screening programme that have to be retested due to the lack of a result from the laboratory; the average time delay between the initial test and the retest; the corresponding figures for nursing home staff and residents respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7909/20]

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 Tests

597. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the current mean average time, respectively for the turnaround of all Covid-19 test results that are positive, negative and cumulative; the number of persons in each category; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7910/20]

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

598. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients in hospitals and nursing homes that experienced a delayed discharge into homecare due to the fact their Covid-19 tests were outdated by the time they were received; the number of patients that received a second test; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7942/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As this is a operational matter, I have referred the question to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

Nursing Staff

599. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of public health nurses in the community healthcare system by county; and the number of those nurses diverted away from public health nursing duties during the public health crisis. [7948/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I have asked the HSE to reply directly to the Deputy.

Questions - Written Answers
Emergency Departments

600. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health when a project (details supplied) will proceed; the range of facilities to be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7959/20]

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 Tests

601. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health the reason testing and tracing is still taking up to ten days while a laboratory (details supplied) is not running at full capacity with staff, many of whom left jobs at home and abroad to join Be on Call for Ireland, having shifts cancelled. [7976/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the HSE has responsibility, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Medical Qualifications

602. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health if a means will be found for the PHECC to accommodate student EMTs to qualify during this period (details supplied) [7977/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council (PHECC) is the independent statutory body with responsibility for standards of education in pre-hospital emergency care. Its functions include the conduct of examinations leading to the award of N.Q.E.M.T. Accordingly, the matter raised by the Deputy has been referred to PHECC for a direct response.

Statutory Instruments

603. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health if Statutory Instrument No. 541/2019 signed by him on 5 November 2019, has come into effect and is affecting persons whose fertility treatments were cancelled due to the outbreak of Covid-19. [7978/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The Children & Families Relationship Act 2015 was enacted in April 2015 and represents a significant milestone for families in Ireland as it aligns our family law with the realities of modern family life in Ireland. The rights, welfare and best interests of children is fundamental to the legislation.

The recent commencement of Parts 2 and 3 of the Children and Family Relationship Act 2015 (as amended) on 4 May will, for the first time, provide a legal framework for registering the births of children who are born as a result of assisted human reproduction involving donated eggs or sperm or embryos. The legislation also requires donor details to be stored through the establishment of the National Donor-Conceived Person Register. This will enable children to access information on their donor should they so wish thus enabling them to exercise their rights to know their genetic identity.

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Commencement of Parts 2&3 also entitles parents of children born in the State as a result of a donor assisted reproduction procedure performed before the 4th of May to apply to the courts for legal recognition of their parental status, subject to certain conditions.

Following commencement, the legislation prohibits the use of non-anonymous gametes in most circumstances, embedding the rights of children to know their genetic heritage in future years.

I am acutely aware of the difficulties the global Covid pandemic has presented for donor-assisted human reproduction (DAHR). It has led to the closure of fertility clinics for several weeks and some individuals and couples have found themselves in a position where they can no longer use gametes they had previously purchased.

However, it is now over 5 years since the Children and Family Relationships Act was enacted and while I had intended to commence Parts 2 & 3 last summer I allowed a longer lead time to for people to make arrangements to use gametes that have already been purchased, where appropriate, and to allow a sufficient pool of donors with the appropriate consent to be acquired in advance of commencement of Parts 2&3.

Further delay to the commencement of Parts 2&3 would have presented an unfair penalty to those parents who have already waited a substantial period of time to have their rights to parentage vindicated in law and most importantly for the State to vindicate the rights of donor conceived persons to information about their genetic identity.

Medical Aids and Appliances

604. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the reason different rates of funding are being paid in respect of wigs and hairpieces to medical card holders residing in different areas in the country; if a breakdown of funding based on each local authority area will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7980/20]

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.

Question No. 605 answered with Question No. 555.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

606. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health if he will create a roadmap for the return to practice of podiatry practitioners; if a support package for the podiatry sector will be established similar to that created for the dentistry sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7982/20]

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 sec-

tion 3 of the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (No. 27 of 2005).

The Government has put in place a suite of measures to support small, medium and larger businesses that are negatively impacted by COVID-19. In addition, 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.

Medical Aids and Appliances

607. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Health if funding for a brace for a person (details supplied) has been denied; and if funding will be made available for same. [7995/20]

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.

Disability Support Services

608. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health when vital services will resume for children living with severe disabilities that require regular physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and respite care; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8016/20]

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

609. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health the measures taken to ensure section 39 organisations remain available to support their vulnerable customers during and after the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8017/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): As the Deputy will be aware, health and social personal services are by their nature varied and complex. In some instances, the HSE itself delivers these services directly and in other circumstances, the HSE relies upon funded providers to deliver these services on its behalf. Sections 38 and 39 of the Health Act 2004 legally underpin

(a) the provision of services by non-statutory providers on behalf of the HSE (Section 38); and

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(b) the provision of services similar or ancillary to a service that the HSE may provide (Section 39).

Amongst Section 39 voluntary organisations are hospices, mental health providers, nursing home and homecare providers, small community-based groups and social care services. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, each HSE Community Healthcare Organisation (CHO) has an Area Crisis Management Team and all services have plans in place for providing supports during this period to ensure continuity of service provision. The HSE holds weekly teleconferences with key stakeholders, including Section 39 service providers, to identify and respond to challenges at local level,

As part of the HSE COVID 19 response, there is a requirement on each of the Area Crisis Management Teams to establish a number of Residential Care & Home Support Covid-19 Response Teams (CRT) to address COVID -19 outbreaks in their area. The purpose of these CRTs is to support the prevention, identification, and management of COVID 19 outbreaks across residential care facilities and Home Support services. These teams provide support across a range of nursing and medical care areas as well as Infection Prevention and Control. The teams also support residential care facilities/Approved centres in the catchment area whether they are public, Section 38, Section 39 or private facilities, and across the care groups of Older People, Disability, & Mental Health. In addition, they also address identified clusters of concern in the Home Support services, as determined by Public Health.

The HSE has put in place a structured governance process through which Section 39 organisations experiencing financial difficulties due to the Covid-19 public health emergency can engage to ensure, where appropriate, continuity of essential services provided by these agencies.

Finally I would like to acknowledge the vital role played by voluntary organisations, including those funded by the HSE under Section 39 of the Health Act, in ensuring a flexible and person-centred response to ensure continued support for our most vulnerable citizens during this challenging period, and as we prepare for the next phase of the response.

Question No. 610 answered with Question No. 496.

Covid-19 Pandemic

611. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the plans in place for the reopening of learning and disability services for adults and children that are closed due to Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8067/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I am informed that HSE Disability Services is now moving from the current crisis-response phase to the next phase, which will be one of recovery and safe reinstatement of supports and services critical to people with disabilities and their families. In this context, the HSE are in the process of detailed planning in order to recover these services in line with the Governments' Roadmap. This will be supported by way of assurance and oversight from the HSE's Chief Clinical Officer along with the NPHE, to ensure the HSE does so in a safe manner. HSE will continue to adhere to public health requirements while also reflecting key policy and legal requirements forming under the UN Convention on the Rights of People with a Disability. This means that services, whilst being delivered in new ways, will gradually be re-introduced to people with disabilities.

The HSE have established a number of Working Groups to design and propose how services can be safely reintroduced. This will be achieved as a collaborative process involving out colleagues within the disability umbrella organisations.

Questions - Written Answers

Please note that many educational services for children with disabilities are under the remit of the Department of Education and Skills and the deputy may wish to direct enquiries in that regard to my colleague, the Minister for Education.

Mental Health Services

612. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Minister for Health the status of the availability of psychiatric services at James Connolly Memorial Hospital, Blanchardstown for those that present at the hospital with mental health issues; his views on whether it is acceptable that on 19 May 2020 up to seven persons that presented to the hospital with mental health issues had to wait up to 24 hours before they were assessed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8072/20]

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.

Addiction Treatment Services

613. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Minister for Health when the HSE addiction tier 4 residential service (details supplied) will be reopened; if the asymptomatic persons presently accommodated in the facility would be better accommodated in other facilities that are available to house same in order that this facility be reopened as soon as possible to help reduce the risk of deaths from substance misuse and underlying mental health issues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8073/20]

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.

Hospital Appointments Status

614. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Health if reassurance will be provided to the thousands of women whose BreastCheck and CervicalCheck appointments have been cancelled due to the Covid-19 crisis that their appointments will be rescheduled and the backlog cleared in a timely manner; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8091/20]

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.

Vaccination Programme

615. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Health the way in which he plans to deal with secondary school students that missed their HPV vaccine (dose 2) and MenACWY vaccines and young children that missed scheduled childhood vaccines due to the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8092/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The HSE National Immunisation Office is responsible for managing vaccine procurement and distribution, developing training and com-

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munication materials for the public and health professionals.

As the question raised by the Deputy is a matter for the National Immunisation Office, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Appointments Status

616. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Health the way in which he plans to deal with the backlog in elective procedures that have built up in University Hospital Waterford and other hospitals nationwide due to the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8093/20]

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 trajectory of the disease means there is now an opportunity for increasing the provision of non-covid care including more routine care

The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) has approved a number of recommendations relating to protecting and maximising the delivery of essential time-critical non-Covid-19 care alongside Covid-19 care. On 5 May, NPHE agreed that its recommendation of 27 March, in regard to the pausing of all non-essential health services should be replaced, in relation to acute care, with a recommendation that delivery of acute care be determined by appropriate clinical and operational decision making. Application of the essential risk mitigating steps set out in the guidance developed under the auspices of the NPHE Expert Advisory group will have operational implications, which will impact on throughput. The HSE is currently engaging with hospital groups to assess the impact of these guidelines on activity. The completion of this work should enable non-urgent elective care to resume within the necessary constraints.

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, with a view to informing activity going forward. 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 and progress the provision of more routine non Covid-19 care.

Where possible, hospitals are working to find innovative ways to enable service provision, which include virtual clinics for some out-patient department appointments. The HSE website provides details on services currently available and operational in each hospital on its website. This information is reviewed frequently and provides up-to-date announcements on services available at each site

(<https://www2.hse.ie/services/hospital-service-disruptions/hospital-service-disruptions-covid19.html>).

In relation to specific plans for elective procedures at University Hospital Waterford, as this is a service issue, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

Hospital Appointments Status

Questions - Written Answers

617. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Health the status of an orthopaedic appointment for a person (details supplied). [8102/20]

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.

Medical Cards

618. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Health the status of a medical card application by a person (details supplied). [8106/20]

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

Hospital Appointments Status

619. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Health the status of an urgent appointment for a person (details supplied) at Our Lady's Children's Hospital, Dublin. [8107/20]

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.

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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.

Medical Qualifications

620. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health when approval will issue from the Medical Council of Ireland in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8108/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Non-EU qualified applicants are required to pass or be exempt from the Medical Council's pre-registration exam, known as the PRES, in order to be registered with the Council and to practise as a medical doctor in Ireland.

Under Registration Rule 2(c). applicants may seek an exemption from the PRES if they hold a higher qualification which is recognised by the Council for the purpose of an exemption and fulfil all the criteria set out in rules. Upon receipt of the relevant documentation, the Medical Council determine whether an applicant qualifies for an exemption. In the event an applicant does not qualify for an exemption, it is open to the applicant to pursue registration via the PRES.

Abortion Services Provision

621. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health when the temporary measures he introduced as part of his response to the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to doctors being allowed to prescribe abortion pills after a teleconference with a patient rather than a physical visit, as required heretofore, will be rescinded in view of the reduction of pressure of work on general practitioners in recent weeks and the assurance by general practitioners to all patients that it is safe to visit their general practitioner; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8125/20]

622. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the medical advice given to him

Questions - Written Answers

before he changed the regulations in relation to the need for a physical visit to a doctor before abortion pills could be prescribed, which he said was in response to the changed circumstances due to Covid-19; who gave this advice; whether he is willing to publish the advice given to him on this matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8126/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 621 and 622 together.

As part of the Government's ongoing efforts to protect public health and limit the spread of COVID-19, the Department of Health and the HSE worked together to put new arrangements in place to temporarily allow termination of pregnancy services in early pregnancy to be provided remotely.

For the duration of the COVID-19 public health emergency, where the need for social distancing, reducing personal contacts and reducing the burden on medical practitioners are paramount, it will be possible for a woman to access a termination under section 12 of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 (i.e. before 12 weeks) from her medical practitioner by telephone or video conference consultation.

The arrangement enabling remote consultation will lapse once the public health emergency is declared over, and the normal functioning and requirements of the original Model of Care for early pregnancy will resume (i.e., visits to medical practitioners).

Disability Services Provision

623. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if there are grant schemes available to those with medically certified mobility issues to assist in the purchase of mobility scooters. [8159/20]

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.

Home Help Service

624. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in counties Longford and Westmeath that have been approved for initial or an increase in home help hours but have yet to receive them. [8162/20]

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.

Hospital Appointments Status

625. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the status of an operation for a person (details supplied). [8165/20]

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

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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

626. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide a breakdown of the health workers that have contracted Covid-19 including those that have died by grade and location, that is, acute, community and so on, age range and whether they are directly employed or employed by a contractor or agency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8169/20]

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

627. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the person or body responsible for the construction of a Covid-19 implementation plan inclusive of resources, human and financial for congregational settings; the way in which the plan was drafted; the person or body that drafted the plan; when it was completed; when it was shared with all facilities and service providers in congregational settings; and if he will provide a copy of the minutes of the meetings in which the plan was drawn up and a copy of the plan. [8170/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Jim Daly) (Jim Daly): Since COVID-19 first emerged in China in December 2019, the Government has taken decisive actions in response to this virus, advised by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NHPET). People living in Long-term Residential Care facilities are particularly vulnerable populations in the

context of Covid-19 and have been identified by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to be at a higher risk of being susceptible to infection from this disease and for subsequent adverse outcomes. This is most likely due to their age, the high prevalence of underlying medical conditions and circumstances where high care support with the activities of daily living is required in collective high physical contact environments. These are characteristics of LTRC in Ireland that make them a high-risk centre for Covid-19 outbreak and contagion across residents and staff. The approach by Government has been public health led in line with data, evidence and best practice as it emerges, through advice from the NPHET. The response to COVID-19 in LTRC is based on preparedness, early recognition, isolation, care and prevention of onward spread. This involves case recognition, testing, contact tracing and examining disease patterns including mortality. The actions and measures we have taken in Ireland to support nursing homes and their residents have been taken, and have evolved on foot of, epidemiological data and guidance from the WHO and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). These measures have been both society wide (e.g. cocooning), as well as focused specifically on residential facilities. The scope of LTRC covers older people, disability and mental health residential care settings. LTRC facilities provide long-term care and short stay, transitional care and respite support either through the State, the voluntary sector or privately. On 10th March 2020 Interim Guidance on Transfer between Care Facilities was circulated and through HIQA was circulated directly to all LTRC registered centres. On the 11th March 2020 the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic and the following day the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) published its 6th update to its Rapid Risk Assessment (RRA), 12th March 2020, including new guidance in relation to the implementation of social distancing measures and prevention and control priorities in relation to inter alia LTRCs. On the same day as the ECDC update, NPHET recommended that Ireland move to “delay phase” and social distancing measures were recommended and announced, including:

- Visiting restrictions in long-term care facilities;
- Individuals who have symptoms should self-isolate for a period of 14 days;
- Staggered breaks in work and greater remote working etc.

The Government’s COVID-19 Action Plan was published on 16th March 2020 and included key actions relating to the protection of vulnerable groups in community settings, including long-term care settings, through maintenance of existing services and enhanced support actions.

Preliminary Clinical and Infection Control Guidance for COVID-19 in nurse-led Residential Care Facilities (RCF) was published by the HSE and circulated to the nursing homes sector on 17th March 2020. The document provides guidance on general measures to reduce the risk of accidental introduction of COVID-19 into a LTRC, procedures to be followed for clinically suspect residents; guidance on clinical investigations and monitoring and on IPC. The document also provides detailed step-by-step instructions across a range of scenarios. As the disease has progressed, a range of enhanced measures for nursing homes have been recommended by NPHET which are now being implemented by relevant agencies.

Each HSE CHO Area Crisis Management Team (ACMT) has prioritised the needs of all long-term care residents within their areas and has also offered very significant support to the nursing homes in their areas, particularly those with COVID 19 outbreaks. Guidance on the set up of COVID Response Teams was issued on 9th April to support all LTRCs within a CHO area and 23 COVID Response Teams are now in place across the 9 CHO areas. These teams are actively supporting all centres with outbreaks in their area through operational guidance and infection prevention and control (IPC) and Clinical support by Geriatricians etc, and in the most at-risk centres, staff are being deployed or sourced to ensure ongoing safe service delivery.

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The establishment and provision of accommodation supports for staff who are living in congregated arrangements has been implemented with approximately 2,000 beds occupied per week. To support designated centres HIQA set up an Infection Prevention and Control Hub providing support to providers and staff via email and phone. This support, guidance and advice includes:

- outbreak preparedness
- outbreak management advice (for example, resident placement, cohorting and special measures where isolations is not possible, transmission and standard precautions)
- understanding HSE advice and its applicability to specific centres
- general support on infection control issues.

Overall a significant package of measures has been adopted to date, including:

- HSE COVID Response Teams across the Community Health Organisations, to provide support and expert guidance to all long-term care residential settings;
- The provision of staffing, PPE, Oxygen, training and other supports to nursing homes;
- The €72.5m COVID-19 Temporary Assistance Payment Scheme;
- A Mortality census;
- HIQA risk assessment of all nursing homes;
- HIQA regulatory assessment framework of the preparedness of designated centres for older people for a COVID19 outbreak;
- Health Protection Surveillance Centre guidance;

Hospital Appointments Status

628. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the details of the proposed catch-up programme for screening services such as BreastCheck, CervicalCheck and Bowel-Screen for the thousands of scheduled screening tests which have been postponed or missed due to Covid-19; the details of additional capacity confirmed to ensure that this catch-up can take place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8171/20]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

629. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which the private hospital sector is being fully utilised to deal with all procedures throughout the Covid-19 health emergency; the extent to which patients with private health insurance have access to their consultant and or hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8190/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) has approved a number of recommendations relating to protecting and maximising the delivery of essential time-critical non-Covid-19 care alongside Covid-19 care. On

Questions - Written Answers

5 May, NPHEAT agreed that its recommendation of 27 March, in regard to the pausing of all non-essential health services should be replaced, in relation to acute care, with a recommendation that delivery of 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 care, for patients and healthcare workers, and support safe delivery of care has been developed under the auspices of the Expert Advisory Subgroup of NPHEAT (EAG) and approved in principle by NPHEAT. The HSE advise that the latest occupancy data for inpatients in private hospitals indicates that overall in-patient occupancy has increased to 51%.

The HSE advise that preliminary figures show that as of 25th May, 7,605 patients had been discharged from private hospitals having undergone an inpatient procedure since the arrangement between the HSE and private hospitals came into force. In the same period 26,007 day-case procedures took place in private hospitals, as well as 35,073 diagnostic appointments and 20,407 outpatient appointments.

Under the terms agreed with the 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 arrangement was agreed. These patients will be treated as public patients and will be prioritised based on clinical needs, as with any other public patient. It is intended that each patient will remain under the care of their existing consultant, where that can be facilitated and if that is not possible, they will be transferred to the care of another consultant as a public patient.

Health and Safety Inspections

630. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health the interventions made by his Department and the HSE in meat processing plants in relation to the Covid-19 outbreak; and the inspections undertaken by public health bodies in these plants [8197/20]

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.

Hospitals Data

631. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients released from acute hospitals to residential nursing homes since January 2020; if a protocol was in place in relation to Covid-19 in the transfer of these patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8198/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The HSE through the Health Protective Surveillance Centre has developed an extensive body of guidance and support tools to assist in the management of COVID-19 cases, including in relation to decisions on transfer of patients/residents between care facilities 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, 04/05/2020.

The decision to discharge patients from hospital to nursing home settings is subject to clinical assessment. Discharges to nursing homes and other settings are a regular, daily feature of a functioning health system. The period from early March to mid-April saw an increase in the

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number of such discharged patients as the health system prepared itself for the expected ‘surge’ in COVID-19 cases. From an older person’s perspective, being admitted for longer than necessary increases the risk of a patient contracting a healthcare associated infection and/or deconditioning. The vast majority of these discharges took place from the 10th March onwards, when clear public health guidance was in place.

On the 10th March 2020, the HSE issued Interim Guidance on Transfer between Care Facilities, which included preliminary guidance on the transfer of hospitalised patients from an acute hospital to a residential care facility in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The guidance based on the best available information at the time set out the various procedures to be followed, including:

- Patients with COVID-19 should not be transferred to a LTRC until they had two consecutive tests indicating virus not detected.

- Patients who were symptomatic and were contacts of a confirmed COVID-19 case should only transfer if the persons had a test indicating virus not detected and it was possible for that person to be isolated for the relevant incubation period;

- Patients who were asymptomatic and were contacts of a confirmed COVID-19 case should only transfer if it was possible for that person to be isolated for the relevant incubation period;

- Transfers from hospitals with no evidence of spread of COVID-19 should proceed as normal, except patients with respiratory tract infection meeting the then criteria for COVID-19 testing – in those cases testing should be carried out and the result should be virus not-detected before transfer.

With regard to the query raised in respect of numbers of patients, this data is not readily available to my Department but I will follow up with the HSE to seek further information.

Medical Aids and Appliances

632. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health the consideration that has been given to the protection of persons serviced by the community and voluntary sector in terms of appropriate provision of PPE to reduce danger of Covid-19 transmission from asymptomatic workers and volunteers to service users; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8221/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): The current advice from the HSE, regarding personal protective equipment (PPE), is as follows:

“Personal protective equipment (PPE) is valuable as an additional protection for patients and staff. It should only be used where it is likely to be beneficial as outlined in the HSE Personal Protective Equipment PPE guidance: (<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/ppe/>). It should not be used in other settings where it does not provide any benefit. The unnecessary use of PPE will deplete stocks and increases the risk that essential PPE will not be available to help protect you, your colleagues and patients when needed”.

In addition, the HSE’s Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) publishes ‘Guidance on cocooning to protect people over 70 years and those extremely medically vulnerable from COVID-19’, the latest version (version 1.4 17 May) of this guidance states the following:

“Visits from people who provide essential support to you such as healthcare, personal sup-

port with your daily needs or social care should continue, but carers and care workers must stay away if they have any of the symptoms of COVID-19. They may find this guidance for Health and Social care workers

(<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/healthandsocialcareworkers/Guidance-HealthSocialCareWorkersWhoVisitHomes.pdf>) who visit homes useful. All people coming to your home should wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds on arrival to your house and often whilst they are there”.

Covid-19 Pandemic

633. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health if and the way in which the commitment he made during the debate in Seanad Éireann on the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020, has been delivered, which ensures appropriate access to independent advocacy support for those detained under section 11(5) of the Act; the way in which his related commitment to engage with civil society organisations and opposition Senators and TDs regarding the development of regulations in respect of detention under the Act has been delivered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8222/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Section 11 of the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020 inserted section 38A in the Health Act 1947. Section 38A of the Health Act 1947 provides for the detention and isolation of persons in certain circumstances. Having regard to matters set out in section 38A(2), a medical officer of health may order in writing the detention and isolation of a person where the medical officer of health believes in good faith that a person is a potential source of infection from Covid-19 and that such person cannot be effectively isolated, refuses to remain or appears unlikely to remain in his or her home or other accommodation arranged, or agreed, by the HSE. Section 38A(5) provides that a person who is the subject of an order may request that his or her detention be reviewed by a medical officer of health, other than the officer who makes the order concerned, on the grounds that he or she is not a potential source of infection.

There is no Ministerial regulation making power under the provisions of section 38A. Decisions are made by a medical officer of health, who must act in good faith and have regard to the provisions of the section.

I understand from the HSE that no person has to date been the subject of a detention order under section 38A of the Health Act 1947. I also understand that the HSE is currently in the process of finalising protocols and procedures and support arrangements in relation to section 38A of the Act.

Disability Services Data

634. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the number of children on the waiting list for early years disability services for HSE in south western areas of Dublin; if the waiting time is 29 months from the date the referral was received (details supplied); the reason for the long delays in the area which predate Covid-19; if some children will miss out on supports in view of the fact they will be too old for early years intervention; the number of children on the list; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that this will impact the current lists; if waiting times vary dependent on resources; and the additional resources that will be provided to the

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area to reduce numbers and waiting times in order to comply with the Disability Act 2005, in view of the lengthening waiting lists [8244/20]

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.

Home Help Service

635. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on waiting lists and the demand for home help nationwide by CHO area, in tabular form. [8245/20]

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

636. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if there have been unusually high clusters of deaths or cases of Covid-19 in public or private nursing homes in south western areas of Dublin [8246/20]

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.

General Practitioner Services

637. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether the charge of €50 applied for a phone consultation with out-of-hours general practitioner services is excessive; if he will work with stakeholders to reduce the fee in view of the fact some consultations can be brief in nature; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8265/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): Under the GMS scheme, the HSE contracts GPs to provide medical services to medical card and GP visit card holders. The GMS contract stipulates that GPs must make suitable arrangements to enable contact to be made with them, or a locum/deputy, for urgent cases outside normal practice hours. Most GPs choose to participate in GP out of hours cooperatives to meet this contractual obligation.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, patient in-person contact with GPs has been curtailed as much as possible to help prevent the spread of the virus. Nurse and doctor advice is provided over the phone where appropriate, and only patients who are clinically assessed as requiring a face to face consultation with a doctor are referred for an appointment.

Questions - Written Answers

GPs are reimbursed by the HSE for medical services provided to medical card or GP visit card holders, while patients who do not hold a medical card or GP visit card access GP services on a private basis, and the fees charged by GPs for services to private patients are a matter of private contract between the GP and their patients.

Similarly, cooperatives that provide out of hour GP services are private companies and therefore the fees charged to their private patients are a matter of private contract between the company and their patients. I have no role in relation to the fees charged by individual GPs or GP out of hours service providers for private consultations.

Health Services Provision

638. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the hospitals which source human milk supplies from a location (details supplied); the hospitals which purchase human milk from abroad; the reason for importing human milk in these instances; if all human milk supplies are tested for pseudomonas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8266/20]

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

Covid-19 Tests

639. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the number of employers that were provided with the Covid-19 test results of their employees; the number of workers involved in each instance; his views on whether this breaches patient confidentiality; if he will issue an instruction that such procedures cease; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8267/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I have sought a specific report from the HSE in relation to this matter. This will set out the circumstances under which results were not communicated to individual workers in affected meat plants and in long term residential care facilities, and the actions that are being taken to ensure that communication of the results of individual COVID-19 tests is directly to the individual.

Covid-19 Pandemic

640. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health when nursing homes can allow visitors once they have outdoor space while visitors would observe physical distancing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8279/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): I am aware of how difficult the current restrictions on visiting are for both nursing home residents and their families, however, the current expert guidance should be adhered to. The primary responsibility of managing the risk of infection with Covid-19 and for control of outbreaks lies with the residential care facility, within their responsibilities for resident care and infection control. This responsibility is referred to in the 2016 National Standards for Residential Care Settings for Older People in Ireland. Appropriate evidence-based guidance to support the work of health and social care providers on a range of issues, including infection prevention and control, has been developed by the HSE and the HPSC and is updated regularly, as appropriate, and made available on their websites. On 5th May, the HPSC published Interim Public Health and Infection Prevention Control Guidelines on the Prevention and Management of Covid-19 Cases and

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Outbreaks in Residential Care Facilities and Similar Units. These are available on the HPSC website. This guidance provides the most up to date advice and information on the public health management and infection prevention and control measures, to inform and advise local planning and management in community residential facilities.

The Taoiseach recently announced a Roadmap for the future easing of restrictions on a phased basis. Phase 3, from 29 June, will see the commencement of a phased approach to visiting at hospitals, residential healthcare centre and other residential settings bearing in mind the particular features of types of settings and each individual centre, also considering Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) availability and other protections.

All nursing homes, public and private continue to be regulated by the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) and have a duty to ensure continued adherence to the existing regulatory and standards framework in the discharge of their duties.

Covid-19 Pandemic

641. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the breakdown of Covid-19 deaths by age, profession, socio-economic class, gender and details of underlying illnesses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8280/20]

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.

Health Services Staff Data

642. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the number of staff recruited to the health service since the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis; the status of the contracts for these staff including the formal employer of these staff; if these contracts are permanent or temporary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8281/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy.

Health Services

643. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health his plans and timeline to permanently increase the capacity in the health service in order that it can run at 80% capacity rather than near to 100% as it was prior to outbreak of Covid-19 to ensure public health physical distancing rules and safe staffing levels can be complied with and extra capacity for crises in addition to tackling the waiting lists and accident and emergency overcrowding; his views on whether this requires permanently retaining all private hospital capacity under the control of the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8282/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Simon Harris): On 5 May 2020, the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHEM) agreed that its recommendation of 27 March to pause all non-essential health services should be replaced with a recommendation that delivery of acute care be determined by appropriate clinical and operational decision-making. Application of the essential risk mitigating steps set out in the guidance developed under the NPHEM Expert Advisory group will have operational implications that will impact on throughput.

Questions - Written Answers

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 with a view to informing activity going forward. 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 and progress the provision of more routine non-Covid-19 care.

The HSE is currently working to develop a continuity of services plan to examine how healthcare activity suspended during Covid-19 can be resumed while maintaining acute occupancy at 80% to provide for surge capacity in the event of a further wave of Covid-19. This work should enable non-urgent elective care to resume within the necessary constraints.

The key to maintaining reduced acute hospital occupancy is to address the gap between capacity and demand as set out in the Health Service Capacity Review 2018. The HSE has advised that plans to address the findings of the capacity review are currently being revised in response to the emerging and potential long-term impact of Covid-19, and my Department is continuing to engage with the HSE in this regard.

The Government published its Action Plan in Response to Covid-19 on 16 March. 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

644. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to reopen the greyhound industry as part of the phasing out of the Covid-19 lockdown (details supplied). [7645/20]

655. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when it will be permitted to allow greyhound racing again under the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. [7485/20]

656. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter regarding the reopening of the greyhound industry (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7491/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I propose to take Questions Nos. 644, 655 and 656 together.

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.

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Under the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, it is currently envisaged that greyhound racing will recommence in stage 3 of the process which starts on 29th June 2020.

On publishing the Roadmap for the Reopening of Society and Business, the Government expressed a willingness to engage and consult with sectors on possible changes to the timings set out in the plan.

My Department will continue to liaise with all sectors under its remit including Bord na gCon to examine if any changes are possible, bearing in mind the pre-eminence of the protection of public health.

Bord na gCon is fully engaged with my Department officials on this matter.

Meat Processing Plants

645. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the protections in place for workers in meat processing plants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7940/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed) (Deputy Michael Creed): In order to address issues in meat plants, Food Business Operators 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.

Veterinary Inspection Service

646. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of veterinary inspectors recruited in his Department in each of the years 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; the number of veterinary inspectors that left during the same period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7131/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed)(Deputy Michael Creed): Veterinary inspectors work in a variety of roles within my Department including food safety, animal health and welfare, certification of exports and provision of laboratory services.

The table below shows the total number of veterinary inspectors recruited by my Department in the years 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020, as well as the total number of veterinary inspectors that ceased their employment with my Department during the same period:

	2018	2019	2020	Total
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Questions - Written Answers

Recruited Veterinary Inspectors	21	28	7	56
Veterinary Inspectors ceased employment with DAFM	6	7	2	15

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

647. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will include boats licensed for aquaculture within the voluntary fleet support scheme for the fishery sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7207/20]

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

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.

Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme

648. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider extending the deadline for the completion of TAMS projects due to the restrictions of Covid-19 in circumstances in which construction and access to building materials is severely impacted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7239/20]

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.

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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.

Horse Racing Industry

649. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when horse racing will be permitted to recommence. [7273/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Horse Racing Ireland (HRI) is a commercial state body established under the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001, and is responsible for the overall administration, promotion and development of the horse racing industry.

Following a meeting of the Government on Friday 15 May 2020, it was confirmed that Horse racing is to resume behind closed doors from 8 June 2020, subject to strict protocols. Horse Racing Ireland has released a 77 page document detailing the protocols that will be implemented.

Forestry Grants

650. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount of funding available under the neighbourwood scheme in each of the years 2017 to 2019 and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7310/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The NeighbourWood Scheme, which is operated by my Department under the Forestry Programme 2014 – 2020 is an innovative package aimed at developing amenity woodlands for local access and enjoyment, to deliver many of the important social benefits associated with our woodlands and forests directly to local communities. The Scheme brings communities and woodlands together, by helping local authorities and other landowners, both public and private, to create ‘close-to-home’ woodland amenities in partnership with communities, for local people to use and enjoy.

Funding is available under three separate elements;

- NeighbourWood (NBR) Establishment funds the establishment of *new* neighbourwood on open ‘greenfield’ sites.
- NBR Enhancement funds the silvicultural enhancement of *existing* woodland already used as neighbourwood, or proposed for development as neighbourwood.
- NBR Facilities funds the installation and upgrade of appropriate recreational facilities within an area submitted under NBR Establishment or NBR Enhancement, or within an existing woodland suitable for recreation but not submitted under NBR Enhancement.

The expenditure on the NeighbourWood Scheme from 2016 to date in 2020 to date is shown in the following table. There was no expenditure in 2019, although my Department received five applications for the Scheme, all of which were approved. So far in 2020, four applications have been received and they are currently being processed.

Year	Amount Paid (€)
2016	166,775

2017	129,948
2018	115,903
2020	60,000

Tuberculosis Eradication Programme

651. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the badger tuberculosis vaccination programme introduced in January 2018; his views on its success as a means of eradicating tuberculosis in cattle; the number of badgers vaccinated by county in each of the years 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; and his plans to expand the programme. [7394/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): In February 2018, I announced that vaccination of badgers against tuberculosis (TB) had commenced as an integral part of the bovine TB eradication programme. Vaccination would commence in areas where successful field trials had already taken place with a view to gradually rolling it out to other parts of the country over time. As I stated then, my view is that this marks a major step forward in the bovine TB eradication programme, enabling Ireland to work towards the eradication of bovine TB in a controlled holistic way, which will serve to protect the badger population whilst also protecting cattle and the livelihoods of farmers.

The Deputy should be aware, however, that some level of badger culling in response to severe TB episodes will still be required. Badger culling contributed significantly to the very considerable improvement in the disease situation nationally in recent years. However, culling of badgers is not sustainable in the long term given its ultimate impact on badger ecology and Ireland's commitments under the Berne convention. The vaccination trials referred to, carried out between 2013 and 2017, took place following 15 years of research work using BCG vaccine to prevent tuberculosis infection in badgers. The peer-reviewed published trials demonstrated that vaccination is no less effective than culling. Badger vaccination will therefore represent a fundamental part of the TB Wildlife Programme and allow for a reduction in the numbers of badgers being culled over the coming years while still maintaining effective control of the risk posed to cattle.

In 2019, vaccination Technical Team Co-ordinators were appointed by my Department and training of staff in all offices was also carried out. The areas that were chosen in this first large extension of vaccination were those areas that had lower incidence of bovine TB and where the areas had been prepared for changeover to vaccination by lowering badger densities as a result of ongoing badger removal. The result of this was that, in late 2019, most counties in the country had areas within them that changed over to vaccination. The changeover in late 2019 represented an increase of the area subject to vaccination increasing from 7,887km² to 17,748km² and it is intended to continue to increase the area under vaccination in the coming years.

Recent IT improvements now allow for every badger in the vaccination area to be recorded electronically when and where it is captured and vaccinated. Currently, approximately 70% of badgers being captured in vaccination areas are new captures and have not been vaccinated previously. This is expected to fall over time as greater population penetration is achieved. Of the 1,870 badgers that were captured in the vaccination area last year, 1,391 were vaccinated with BCG, 42 were removed for epidemiological reasons, 434 had been previously vaccinated and 3 were euthanized for health reasons. Badger vaccination efforts vary from region to region at different times of the year based on disease risk and disease priorities.

The numbers of badgers vaccinated by County for 2019 and for the first six weeks of 2020

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are set out in the following table. More up to date numbers will be available shortly.

County	WUS 2019 Vaccination	WUS 2020 Vaccination - First 6 weeks
Carlow	0	0
Cavan	42	24
Clare	0	0
Cork	131	62
Donegal	29	23
Dublin	11	0
Galway	103	36
Kerry	21	58
Kildare	0	32
Kilkenny	320	78
Laois	36	35
Leitrim	0	0
Limerick	18	23
Longford	67	40
Louth	55	35
Mayo	27	31
Meath	9	0
Monaghan	62	27
Offaly	43	33
Roscommon	65	18
Sligo	0	0
Tipperary	155	60
Waterford	189	38
Westmeath	0	0
Wexford	0	41
Wicklow	8	0

Precise information related to the numbers of badgers vaccinated by county for 2018 are not available as the only areas in the vaccination zones in 2018 were the former vaccination trial areas. Vaccination of badgers in 2018 continued at the levels experienced during the trials, i.e. at a rate of approximately 1,000 per year. This is in comparison to the default procedure of removing badgers which continued at approximately 6,000 badgers per year but which reduced last year to 5,352 as badger vaccination increased.

The 2018 End of Year Report for the Department's Wildlife Unit is available at:

www.agriculture.gov.ie/media/migration/animalhealthwelfare/diseasecontrols/tuberculosisandbrucellosis/tbforum/2018NPWSEndofYearReport090819.pdf.

Covid-19 Pandemic

652. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he was requested by persons in government or in a Department or NPHEt to give his views on when

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horse racing should recommence here; if so, the way in which he was requested; if so, the person or persons that made the request; and his response to same. [7418/20]

653. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he was requested by persons in government or in a Department or NPHE to give his views on when greyhound racing should recommence here; if so, the way in which he was requested; if so, the person or persons that made the request; and his response to same. [7419/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I propose to take Questions Nos. 652 and 653 together.

Horse Racing Ireland (HRI) is a commercial state body established under the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001, and is responsible for the overall administration, promotion and development of the horse racing industry. Similarly, 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 the 1st May 2020, the Taoiseach set out a roadmap for easing the Covid-19 restrictions, which began on Monday 18th 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.

On publishing the Roadmap for the Reopening Society and Business, the Government stated an appetite to engage and consult with sectors on possible changes to the timings in the plan.

Through my Department, Horse Racing Ireland were fully engaged in this consultation process from the outset. I was fully supportive of this engagement. I would like to commend HRI and the Irish Horse Racing Regulatory Board for the protocols which they have developed, with the aim of safeguarding everyone's health and ensuring that racing will resume in a safe and appropriate manner.

My Department will now assist other sectors under its remit with their engagement in the same process where appropriate, bearing in mind at all times the pre-eminence of the protection of public health.

Bord na gCon are fully engaged with my Department on this matter.

Covid-19 Pandemic

654. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason horse racing will be permitted from 8 June 2020 behind closed doors but greyhound racing will not be permitted; the difference between the industries; the risks found in greyhound racing that do not exist in horse racing to prevent the same treatment; the risk assessment that has been carried out to inform the decision; if the risk assessment will be made available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7455/20]

657. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he has received submissions from an association (details supplied) in relation to the reopening of greyhound racing; if he plans to proceed at the same pace as horse racing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7493/20]

667. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if grey-

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hound racing will be permitted to return behind closed doors on the same date that horse racing is resuming behind closed doors from 8 June 2020 as per correspondence from an organisation (details supplied); and if he is reviewing same. [7675/20]

668. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the grounds on which the decision to allow horse racing to recommence earlier than initially planned was made; and if similar consideration will be given to other sports such as greyhound racing. [7713/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I propose to take Questions Nos. 654, 657, 667 and 668 together.

Horse Racing Ireland (HRI) is a commercial state body established under the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001, and is responsible for the overall administration, promotion and development of the horse racing industry. Similarly, 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.

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On publishing the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, the Government expressed a willingness to engage and consult with sectors on possible changes to the timings in the plan.

Through my Department, HRI was engaged in this consultation process from the outset and I was fully supportive of this engagement. I would like to commend HRI and the Irish Horse Racing Regulatory Board for the protocols which they have developed, with the aim of safeguarding everyone's health and ensuring that racing will resume in a safe and appropriate manner.

My Department will now assist other sectors under its remit with their engagement in the same process where appropriate, bearing in mind at all times the pre-eminence of the protection of public health.

Bord na gCon is fully engaged with my Department officials on this matter.

Questions Nos. 655 and 656 answered with Question No. 644.

Question No. 657 answered with Question No. 654.

Agriculture Schemes

658. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the grants available for farmers that wish to extend their cattle holding facilities by way of building additional spans onto their existing sheds and install a cattle crush; if there are different rules in relation to whether the person involved is involved in dairy, beef or is dealing in cattle; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7516/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The TAMS II Scheme provides grant aid for a comprehensive range of investment items. This aid is available to all applicants who met the requirements of the scheme regardless of their farming sector.

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Investments relating to the addition of roofed animal handling facilities are grant aided under the Animal Welfare, Safety and Nutrient Storage Scheme, Organic Capital Investment Scheme and, if applicable, the Young Farmers' Capital Investment Scheme. Applicants can build on to an existing structure, providing the existing structure meets my Department's specifications. Alternatively, they can build an independent new structure just beside an existing structure.

Full details of eligibility criteria and all items grant aided under TAMS II are available on my Department's website.

Organic Farming Scheme

659. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of a farm payment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7519/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The balancing payment in respect of the 2019 Organic Farming Scheme will issue in the next few days to the above named person. I can confirm that they have been paid on all eligible land parcels for 2019.

Agriculture Schemes

660. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if there are grants available from his Department or bodies and agencies under his remit that provide grant funding towards the costs of planting land for forestry, biodiversity and beekeeping (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7527/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): My Department provides generous grants to landowners who wish to plant forestry through the Afforestation Grant and Premium Scheme. The Scheme provides 100% of establishment grants with annual premiums for up to 15 years, depending on the species chosen. Landowners considering forestry should contact a registered forester who will complete the application on their behalf. Further information is available on my Department's website, including rates payable and a list of registered foresters.

A wide variety of schemes are specifically focussed on the establishment and management of forests that deliver significant biodiversity benefits. The Native Woodland Establishment Scheme supports the planting of new native woodland and the Native Woodland Conservation Scheme aims to conserve existing native woodland and help to convert conifer stands to native woodland at key locations. In addition, the Woodland Environmental Fund, launched in 2018, encourages businesses to get involved in encouraging private landowners to take up the Native Woodland Establishment Scheme. Business provide a 'top up' payment of €1,000/ha to the landowner as a further incentive to convert from agriculture to native woodland. So far, Microsoft, Aldi, Lidl, An Post, Accenture and KBI Global Investment have participated in the fund.

Support measures for the sustainable management of forests, with the added benefit of increasing biodiversity, are also funded by my Department. The Continuous Cover Forestry scheme redirects plantations away from the 'normal' clear fell / reforestation model and into continuous cover forestry. As trees are felled singly or in small groups (typically with smaller machinery) and the gaps left are planted up or fill in with natural regeneration, the overall canopy cover is left intact, protecting the soil and the woodland ecosystem. The Woodland Improve-

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ment Thinning and Tending Scheme for broadleaves aims to improve the quality and value of retained trees by removing poorer quality stems and redirecting growth onto better quality ones. This delivers a biodiversity benefit as it will open up the canopy and allow increased levels of light infiltration onto the forest floor, encouraging ground vegetation and the scrub understory. This increase in habitat biodiversity leads to more insects and birds in these more diverse habitats. Protection of this grounded vegetation and scrub layer is further supported by the Deer Fencing Scheme. Excluding deer also allows the natural regeneration of trees and scrubs, as seed falling onto the site can germinate and become established, which increases the woodland biodiversity generally.

My Department recognises the important role bees play within agriculture and for biodiversity as both pollinators and honey producers, by providing a range of supports and initiatives to encourage and assist beekeepers and the beekeeping associations.

Support to the beekeeping sector in Ireland is provided through the National Apiculture Programme, which provides funding to carry out applied research for the Irish apiculture sector. The Commercial Horticulture grant aid scheme provides grant aid towards capital investments in specialised beekeeping equipment and also contributes annual grants to Irish National Beekeepers associations to help their associated members and branches to pursue the craft of beekeeping to the highest standards and to also inform the general public about the environmental role that bees play in maintaining Irish biodiversity and crop production. Owners of native woodland are also encouraged to contact local bee-keepers and to offer to 'host-a-hive' within their woodland.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

661. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the basis of the proposed payment rate for the Covid-19 voluntary fleet tie-up scheme; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the scheme is not sufficient to meet the loss of business and debts of fishermen affected; if he will convene a fresh round of talks with representatives of the fishing sector relating to the scheme and broader sectorial issues caused by Covid-19 and Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7546/20]

663. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he is satisfied that the level of financial support being offered to owners of fishing vessels to support them through the Covid-19 crisis compares favourably with the financial supports being offered by other EU states and the UK Government. [7606/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I propose to take Questions Nos. 661 and 663 together.

The Government's primary objective for the fishing sector throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic has been to maintain fishing activity in order to ensure critical food supply lines to the domestic and European markets. For this reason, from the outset the Government classified fishing as an essential service and kept the fishery harbours and related support services open throughout the Pandemic. This remains the primary Government objective in relation to the fishing sector.

There has been significant and sustained offshore fishing activity by the Irish fleet over the past three months. This has been helped by the fact that the price of oil, a critical cost factor for the fleet, has reduced dramatically. Together with good fishing weather, these factors have greatly assisted the viability of fishing operations, notwithstanding reduced market prices for

fish.

The Covid-19 Temporary Fleet Tie up Scheme is simply designed as a safety net scheme to provide a further option to fishermen who choose not to continue fishing. It is not designed as a replacement for viable fishing activity, wherever those possibilities exist. To date, most Irish offshore fishing vessels have continued to fish. As European and Asian markets gradually begin to open up, as is happening at present, it is likely that demand and prices will continue to improve and, in those circumstances, many fishermen will continue to choose to fish and not to avail of the scheme. The Temporary Tie up Scheme, as a safety net scheme, is not designed to attract all fishermen or to bring all fishing activity to a halt.

Fishermen have been and will continue to be able to avail of the horizontal Government Covid-19 supports, such as the Pandemic Unemployment Benefit, the Wage Subsidy Scheme and the banking arrangements. Those horizontal supports continue to be available to the fishing sector and the Temporary Tie up Scheme is a further complementary and additional support to fishermen who choose not to continue fishing. The Scheme is not intended as an income replacement scheme for fishing vessel owners. The Scheme is intended to contribute towards the fixed costs associated with fishing vessels of various sizes that voluntarily choose to tie-up. 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. Those support levels are in line with the fixed costs reported by the fleet to BIM through the EU Data Collection Framework.

It is up to each fishing vessel owner to decide whether to tie-up for a month or two or to keep fishing and in line with the Government policy of keeping the food chain operating. It is, of course, preferable that the supply of fish continues to satisfy available markets.

In general, fishing vessel owners want their vessels to be at sea and fishing. The Scheme was capped at a maximum of 66% of each vessel size category in the fleet to ensure a continued level of fishing activity. To assist the continuation of fishing activity over the coming period, generous vessel quota allocations are being made for the month of June.

Foreshore Issues

662. Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to the construction of a road approximately 400 metres in length along the foreshore of Lough Foyle at Clar, Redcastle, County Donegal without planning or consultation; and if his Department can co-operate with the Loughs Agency to protect the foreshore of Lough Foyle on the Inishowen side. [7605/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): My Department is responsible for foreshore licensing in respect of structures/activities relating to fisheries and aquaculture and in respect of relevant structures/activities in designated Fishery Harbour Centres. The licensing of other structures/activities on the foreshore is a matter for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government.

My Department's Marine Engineering Division has been asked to examine the matter raised by the Deputy with a view to ascertaining the purpose of the works in question. As soon as that report is available, my Department will be in a position to advise the Deputy further and will contact the Deputy directly in that regard.

Question No. 663 answered with Question No. 661.

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664. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will establish a task force involving all meat industry stakeholders to tackle the threat posed by Covid-19. [7636/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The Department of Health and the HSE are the public health authorities leading the national response to the public health pandemic.

A national Outbreak Control Team reporting to the Health Protection Surveillance Centre has been established. The Group's remit is to oversee and co-ordinate the approach to the prevention and management of Covid- 19 outbreaks in meat plants in Ireland. The group is chaired by the HSE, with a range of participants, including DAFM.

This Group has devised detailed guidance specifically tailored to the meat industry. This guidance document, which was issued to all meat processing facilities on 15 May 2020 covers:

- Infection prevention and control measures to prevent cases and control outbreaks for example screening at entry to the site;
- Steps to be taken when an individual case is suspected or confirmed; and
- Additional steps to be taken when an outbreak has occurred.

My Department will continue to contribute to the National Outbreak Control Team and to provide any support required to the HSE at local and central level, as part of the whole of Government response to the pandemic. To this end, along with its statutory role in relation to food safety, the Department will support the HSE and other agencies in monitoring the effective implementation of the guidance at DAFM-approved meat plants.

In addition to public health aspects, there are likely to be significant economic impacts for the agri-food sector, arising from reduced demand in key markets around the world. 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.

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. 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 (SMP, Butter, Cheese), Beef and Sheepmeat.

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. 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.

Hardship Grant Scheme

665. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the case of a person (details supplied) in County Leitrim who was refused the hardship grant even though their herd is restricted will be reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7667/20]

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Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The Hardship Grant Scheme is aimed at assisting eligible herdowners who retain and feed animals during prolonged periods of restriction as a result of a TB breakdown. Eligibility for the scheme is subject to certain criteria and is designed to alleviate the additional feed costs incurred. One of these criteria is that the holding remain restricted for a period of at least 60 days. Eligibility for payment commences after 60 days.

My Department has reviewed this case and the applicant is entitled to a Hardship Grant covering the period 4th– 30th April 2020. This payment will issue promptly.

Beef Industry

666. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he has considered convening a meeting of the Beef Taskforce remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7673/20]

689. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when the next meeting of the Beef Taskforce will take place; the issues to be discussed at the meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7990/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I propose to take Questions Nos. 666 and 689 together.

The most recent meeting of the Beef Taskforce was 9th January 2020. Taskforce members were recently issued with a written update on the ongoing work of the Taskforce and these documents are available on my Department's website on www.agriculture.gov.ie/farmingsectors/beef/beeftaskforce.

Taskforce members have been advised that a meeting of the Beef Taskforce will be convened as soon as practical.

Questions Nos. 667 and 668 answered with Question No. 654.

Fishery Harbour Centres

669. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he is or has previously considered providing funding to local authorities for the installation of sea-bins following successful introductions in Howth Harbour; and the details of such an analysis. [7800/20]

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.

The responsibility for the maintenance and development of Local Authority owned piers, harbours and slipways rests with the Local Authority in the first instance and its parent Depart-

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ment, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government thereafter.

My Department has facilitated the installation of sea bins at both Dingle and Howth Fishery Harbour Centres in recent years. Harbour management see the appropriate deployment of these devices as complementary to other on going operations to remove unwanted debris from the waters within the harbours.

As indicated, my legislative remit does not extend to Local Authority owned piers, harbours and slipways, and given that the ownership of, and overall responsibility for these piers, harbours and slipways rests with the Local Authority, it is for the Local Authority to decide if it wishes to carry out any developments, 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 piers, harbours and slipways within their ownership under the annual Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme, subject to available Exchequer funding and overall national priorities.

Under the 2020 Local Authority programme, I have approved funding of €3.1m to assist 10 coastal Local Authorities undertake and complete 58 development and repair projects on harbours and slipways owned by them. The package provides funding for maintenance and repair works in addition to supporting the ongoing development and enhancement of harbour facilities, including some marine leisure developments.

It is a matter for the relevant Local Authorities as to whether the installation of a sea bin would be of benefit and if it could operate effectively at harbours within their ownership. Should any application for funding be submitted by a Local Authority under any future programme in relation to the installation of a sea bin, 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.

Young Farmers Scheme

670. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of applications to the 2020 national reserve and young farmers scheme by county in tabular form. [7824/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The number of applications to the 2020 National Reserve and the 2020 Young Farmers Scheme, by county, is set out in the table below. In addition to the figures shown, there are further applications under these schemes which were submitted under temporary reference numbers where an application for a herd number has been made and is currently being processed. Therefore, the figures in the table are subject to change.

County	Young Farmers Scheme	National Reserve
CARLOW	85	6
CAVAN	329	24
CLARE	339	35
CORK	869	73
DONEGAL	314	32
DUBLIN	33	6
GALWAY	709	69
KERRY	434	42

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County	Young Farmers Scheme	National Reserve
KILDARE	99	12
KILKENNY	266	18
LAOIS	211	13
LEITRIM	152	21
LIMERICK	323	41
LONGFORD	140	18
LOUTH	61	12
MAYO	674	65
MEATH	219	21
MONAGHAN	213	17
OFFALY	224	19
ROSCOMMON	280	19
SLIGO	206	31
TIPPERARY	470	62
WATERFORD	177	15
WESTMEATH	174	22
WEXFORD	274	20
WICKLOW	106	13

Forestry Data

671. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount received by farmers and non-farmers for forestry payments in 2019 with respect to planting in each county under the forestry programme; and the percentage breakdown for planting in each county between the total amount received in payments by farmers and non-farmers in tabular form. [7825/20]

672. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of farmers and non-farmers participating in planting schemes under the forestry programme by county in tabular form. [7826/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I propose to take Questions Nos. 671 and 672 together.

The current Forestry Programme (2014-2020) offers an ambitious and attractive set of forestry measures aimed at increasing timber production and continuing to provide jobs in the forestry sector while, at the same time, improving the quality of the natural environment. The afforestation scheme offers a fixed grant towards the costs, subject to the maximum laid down in the scheme's terms and conditions. In addition, annual premiums are payable to new forests which qualify for an afforestation grant for a maximum period of 15 years.

There is no distinction between the rate paid to farmers and non-farmers under the 2014-2020 Forestry Programme as the aim is to make the afforestation scheme accessible to all land-owners. However, the table below shows that overwhelmingly, forestry premiums are paid to farmers.

The following table shows the number of farmer/non-farmers in each county, the amount of premiums received in 2019 and the percentage of premiums paid to farmers/non-farmers.

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County	Total No. Applicants	Total Premiums Paid 2019	Number Farmers	Amount Paid to Farmers	% Paid to Farmers	Number Non-Farmers	Amount Paid to Non-Farmers	% Paid to Non-Farmers
Carlow	109	€462,420.65	100	€424,482.69	91.80%	9	€37,937.96	8.20%
Cavan	674	€2,587,346.17	577	€2,182,883.96	84.37%	97	€404,462.21	15.63%
Clare	1,104	€5,155,605.94	971	€4,538,561.61	88.03%	133	€617,044.33	11.97%
Cork	1,702	€8,147,546.96	1,527	€7,444,437.16	91.37%	175	€703,109.80	8.63%
Donegal	309	€1,686,901.16	266	€1,570,002.76	93.07%	43	€116,898.40	6.93%
Dublin	22	€62,220.94	16	€52,393.46	84.21%	6	€9,827.48	15.79%
Galway	799	€3,355,786.31	703	€2,963,489.04	88.31%	96	€392,297.27	11.69%
Kerry	1,175	€5,576,646.00	1,048	€5,113,555.15	91.70%	127	€463,090.85	8.30%
Kildare	163	€767,895.67	143	€723,053.33	94.16%	20	€44,842.34	5.84%
Kilkenny	487	€2,467,050.51	455	€2,360,613.25	95.69%	32	€106,437.26	4.31%
Laois	275	€1,642,202.71	242	€1,546,284.89	94.16%	33	€95,917.82	5.84%
Leitrim	477	€2,650,098.52	370	€2,085,926.02	78.71%	107	€564,172.50	21.29%
Limerick	737	€3,868,610.10	656	€3,572,423.10	92.34%	81	€296,187.00	7.66%
Longford	421	€1,798,419.73	357	€1,590,024.87	88.41%	64	€208,394.86	11.59%
Louth	60	€347,082.94	48	€318,120.84	91.66%	12	€28,962.10	8.34%
Mayo	904	€3,322,918.90	747	€2,872,390.00	86.44%	157	€450,528.90	13.56%
Meath	278	€1,259,540.85	241	€1,149,720.87	91.28%	37	€109,819.98	8.72%
Monaghan	187	€675,653.03	154	€576,345.66	85.30%	33	€99,307.37	14.70%
Offaly	416	€2,236,265.29	381	€2,128,903.77	95.20%	35	€107,361.52	4.80%
Roscommon	723	€3,064,230.32	603	€2,630,413.16	85.84%	120	€433,817.16	14.16%
Sligo	465	€1,798,238.73	390	€1,593,277.03	88.60%	75	€204,961.70	11.40%
Tipperary	858	€4,638,004.82	774	€4,387,233.83	94.59%	84	€250,770.99	5.41%
Waterford	373	€1,718,434.57	338	€1,644,945.99	95.72%	35	€73,488.58	4.28%
Westmeath	374	€2,054,911.13	316	€1,861,923.57	90.61%	58	€192,987.56	9.39%
Wexford	393	€1,726,047.83	352	€1,656,437.78	95.97%	41	€69,610.05	4.03%
Wicklow	242	€1,276,018.30	197	€1,109,474.57	86.95%	45	€166,543.73	13.05%
Totals	13,727	€64,346,098.08	11,972	€58,097,318.36	90.29%	1,755	€6,248,779.72	9.71%

Forestry Data

673. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the percentage of agricultural land in each county that has been planted with forestry to date in tabular form. [7827/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The area of land afforested in each county is set out in the following table, which is taken from the third National Forest Inventory (NFI) published in 2019 and is the most up-to-date dataset currently available. The area of forest in Ireland is estimated to be 770,020 ha or 11% of the total land area of Ireland (NFI 2017).

County	% Area
Carlow	9.4
Cavan	9.3
Clare	17.2
Cork	12.1
Donegal	11.4
Dublin	6.5
Galway	9.9

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County	% Area
Kerry	12.1
Kildare	6.1
Kilkenny	9.6
Laois	15.4
Leitrim	18.9
Limerick	10.4
Longford	8.4
Louth	2.9
Mayo	9.2
Meath	5.7
Monaghan	4.6
Offaly	14.7
Roscommon	11.1
Sligo	11.4
Tipperary	11.8
Waterford	14.7
Westmeath	8.2
Wexford	6.2
Wicklow	17.9

Forestry Data

674. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the final allocation made to each specific forestry scheme in his Department for 2020. [7828/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The total allocation for the Forestry Programme for 2020 is €103.5m. The funding for the Forestry Programme of my Department, reflects the target of 8,000ha of new afforestation, outlined in the Government's Climate Action Plan, 2019.

The capital allocation is estimated at €100.1m This provides for new afforestation (€26.5m), existing annual premiums for current Afforestation Scheme participants (€62.25m) and Forestry Support and ancillary schemes (€11.35m).

The support schemes include the Forest Road Works Scheme along with other forestry schemes such as Woodland Improvement, Native Woodland Conservation and Neighbour-Wood. The capital allocation also provides for the National Forest Inventory, which is commencing a new cycle in 2020.

The current allocation of just over €3.4m provides for other support schemes including the very successful Forestry Knowledge Transfer Group Scheme, which is now reopening for 2020. I have also provided funding for training and promotional strategies in 2020.

Forestry Data

675. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Ma-

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rine the amount of broadleaf forestry planting as a percentage of total planting in 2018 and 2019, in tabular form. [7829/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Interest in planting native woodlands has been increasing, since I introduced a series of new measures following the Forestry Programme (2014-2020) Mid-term Review in 2018. My Department pays generous grants and premiums as part of the Afforestation Grant and Premium Scheme, particularly for broadleaf categories.

In 2018, payments issued in relation to the new planting of 374 hectares of native woodlands, an increase of 38% compared to 2017, while in 2019, the figure for new planting of native woodlands was 310 hectares. The percentage of broadleaf planting as a percentage of total planting has also increased considerably since the new measures targeting broadleaf afforestation through increased grant and premium rates for relevant planting categories were introduced in 2018. In 2017, 21% of trees planted were broadleaf trees. This percentage increased to 27% in 2018, remained stable at 25% in 2019 and has increased to 36%, during the months up to April in 2020.

The following table shows the total percentage of broadleaf planted in 2018 and 2019.

Total planting in ha	2018	2019
Conifer	2,932.13	2,656.73
Broadleaves	1,066.35	893.16
Total (ha)	3,998.48	3,549.89
% Broadleaves (of total)	26.67%	25.16%

Forestry Data

676. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the annual planting targets per hectare for all categories in each grant and premium category for 2018 and 2019 of the Forestry Programme 2014-2020; the actual number of hectares planted in each such year for these categories; and the number of hectares planted out of each annual target set on a percentage basis in tabular form. [7830/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): While overall targets are set for planting programme as a whole, only Native Woodland, Agroforestry, and Forestry for fibre have specific planting targets and there are no specific targets for the other Grant and Premium Categories (GPC) 1 to 8 inclusive. The relevant data is provided in tabular form as requested.

Scheme	2018 Target	2018 Actual	% of target planted	2019 Target	2019 Actual	% of target planted
Afforestation, ha	7,205	4,025	56%	8,115	3,549	44%
of which afforestation (GPC1- 8)	6,215	3,649	59%	6,615	3,228	49%

Questions - Written Answers

Scheme	2018 Target	2018 Actual	% of target planted	2019 Target	2019 Actual	% of target planted
of which NWS establishment (GPC9 & 10)	450	374	83%	450	310	69%
of which Agro-forestry (GPC11)	40	1	2%	50	6.78	14%
Of which energy and fibre (GPC12)	500	1	0%	1,000	4.01	0.40%

Environmental Policy

677. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the way in which the European Commission proposals (COM(2018) 392 final) for the next CAP and reference to GAEC II in Annex III (preservation of carbon rich soils such as peatlands and wetlands) will be implemented at primary producer level; and the discretion member states will have to identify the peatland and wetland areas in question. [7831/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The new legislative proposals for the Common Agricultural Policy 2021 - 2027 were launched in June 2018 by Commissioner Hogan. The proposals outline a greater environmental ambition post-2020 and recognise the role the agriculture sector has to play in helping Member States achieve their environmental and climate change targets.

Negotiations on the CAP proposals are ongoing and, while significant progress has been made, decisions on many key issues have still to be finalised. These include the proposed new green architecture, which is aimed at achieving a higher level of climate ambition.

The CAP Strategic Plan Regulation introduces GAEC II in Annex III with a view to protecting wetland and peatland ecosystems. This text is still subject to change as negotiations are ongoing. Ireland has requested clarification on the meaning of “protection” from the Commission and this will inform implementation of measures at farm level.

I can assure the Deputy that I will continue to actively participate in the negotiation process and work with my European counterparts to secure the best possible outcome for the Irish agri-food sector.

Meat Processing Plants

678. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of meat processing factories in which Covid-19 cases have been confirmed in staff employed; and the number of employees in such factories that have tested positive by county in tabular form. [7832/20]

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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 involved, the Food Businesses and the Health Service Executive.

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

679. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the new measures which will be introduced to reduce the transmission of Covid-19 in meat factories; if the relevant authorities discussed with processors the deep cleaning of plants in which high transmission cases have been identified; if it is envisaged to introduce a testing regime which isolates suspected cases at plants and the provision of an adequate place to self-isolate if the option to do so is not available in the household of the person; and the agreed next steps to reduce transmission rates at these plants while maintaining the food supply chain. [7833/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): In order to address issues in meat plants, Food Business Operators 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 and my Department is represented on this committee. All matters in relation to transmission of Covid 19, together with the appropriate isolation and sanitising measures will be addressed by the team.

Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme

680. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps he is taking to ensure farmers will have sufficient time to submit applications under TAMS for slatted shed buildings before the upcoming deadline in view of the fact that planning applications from some local authorities have been suspended during the Covid-19 crisis period. [7835/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I am aware of this issue and have introduced flexibilities for the applicants concerned. Due to delays being experienced in securing full planning permission or a letter of exemption from local authorities, the following temporary measure will be in place for the current Tranche of TAMSII.

Applicants/Agents who are experiencing delays may make an application under the current Tranche 17 which closes 5 June 2020 and these applications will be accepted as long as full

planning permission or letter of exemption is submitted online by 10 July 2020. After this date, incomplete applications will be rejected and those applicants may apply under a future tranche.

Further details of how to upload the claim without the planning permission or the letter of exemption can be found on the Departments website as follows: www.agriculture.gov.ie/customerservice/coronaviruscovid-19/tams/.

Agrifood Sector

681. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he is considering the proposal from an organisation (details supplied) to support agrifood companies that export product to markets, a tool that other EU member states have deployed; if he or his officials discussed the issue with the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation and her officials; and if so, the agreed next steps. [7836/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): As the Deputy will be aware, policy in relation to export credit insurance is the responsibility of my colleague, the Minister of Business Enterprise and Innovation.

Officials in my Department are actively engaging with agri-food sector stakeholders to discuss various challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, including those related to exports. They also participate in cross-Departmental mechanisms to ensure that appropriate and effective supports are available to all businesses.

With regard to the challenges currently faced by agri food businesses, 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 cashflow 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 are eligible for the wide range of supports put in place for businesses generally. This includes the National COVID-19 Income 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 are 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, with up to 40% available to the agri-food sector, will be made available through the banks, with details to be announced shortly.

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In addition, the Government have announced agreement of a further suite of measures to further support business 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 agribusinesses, 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.

I will continue to work with stakeholders across the sector in relation to the impact of this crisis and the Government will continue to keep the needs of the whole agri-food sector under review as the situation evolves.

Veterinary Medicines

682. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on correspondence (details supplied) with regard to maintaining the current system by which farmers source veterinary products. [7838/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): EU Regulation 2019/6 on veterinary medicinal products comes into effect in January 2022. This Regulation is binding in full and has direct effect on all Member States. There is limited national discretion available to Member States in relation to a number of the Regulations articles.

In 2004, European legislation established a requirement that all veterinary medicinal products that are intended for use in food-producing animals should be subject to a veterinary prescription. However, a 2006 EU Directive allowed for the maintenance of non-prescription status for certain veterinary medicinal products which did not present a risk to human or animal health or to the environment, and which met the specified criteria for exemption from veterinary prescription. Ireland availed of the exemption in Directive 2006/130/EC at the time and antiparasitics were allowed to continue to be available without prescription.

There is a similar exemption available under the new EU Regulation 2019/6. However, since that time, our knowledge regarding the impact of extensive use of antiparasitics has changed. For example, antiparasitic resistance has been widely reported in parasites of livestock species in Ireland and globally, resistance is developing year-on-year and is now a significant animal health issue.

In 2019, the Health Product Regulatory Authority’s (HPRA) Advisory Committee for Veterinary Medicines (ACVM) established a Task Force to review the method of supply of antiparasitic veterinary medicinal products that are intended for food-producing animals against the criteria set out in Regulation 2019/6. A copy of the Report is available on the HPRA’s website www.hpra.ie.

The Report states that the available scientific evidence shows that antiparasitic veterinary medicines that are intended for use in food-producing species do not comply with the criteria for derogation from veterinary prescription specified in EU Regulation 2019/6. It also states that a consequence of this determination is that any such products that are supplied without veterinary prescription will need to be upregulated to supply under veterinary prescription. Therefore, Ireland and all other Member States must now comply with this regulation from January 2022.

Questions - Written Answers

In accordance with existing national legislation, antiparasitic veterinary medicinal products for use in food-producing species that are supplied under prescription may be dispensed by veterinary practitioners, pharmacists and licensed merchants. This means that all current stakeholders that are already permitted to supply such products will be entitled to continue to stock them in the future but from January 2022 onwards, a veterinary prescription will be needed to dispense them.

My Department is committed to working with all stakeholders in considering how best to implement the new EU Regulations on veterinary medicinal products and plan to have a public consultation in Q2 2020. A dedicated email address has been set up for this purpose and I would encourage all interested parties to send their observations to vetmedregs@agriculture.gov.ie.

Basic Payment Scheme

683. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if farm lands with designations such as special area of conservation, special protected area, natural heritage area will be eligible for the basic payment scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7911/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): EU Regulations governing the Basic Payment Scheme require that for agricultural land to be deemed eligible for payment, it must be subject to an agricultural activity. Ineligible features, e.g. scrub, rock, etc., are not eligible and must be deducted from the area being declared for payment. Furthermore, land that is abandoned, i.e. no agriculture activity taking place, is not considered as eligible land. Lands designated as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), Special Protected Areas (SPA) or Natural Heritage Areas can be considered as eligible land for payment purposes subject to the land meeting these conditions.

There is further provision under Article 32 of Regulation 1307/2013, which provides that where lands designated as SAC or SPA develop ineligible features as a result of the requirements of such designation, the land may be considered eligible for payment, subject to additional conditions, i.e. the land must have been claimed and deemed eligible for payment under the 2008 Single Payment Scheme and any increase in the area of ineligible features must be directly linked to the management requirements of such designation. SAC or SPA land that is abandoned cannot be considered as eligible for payment under this provision. Also, rock which is a hard feature can never be eligible for payment in these parcels.

Meat Processing Plants

684. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of meat plants that have recorded instances of Covid-19; the location of each plant affected; the number of instances per centre; the measures enacted by his Department to minimise the instances and to protect the workers at these and other plants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7912/20]

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 involved, the Food Businesses and the Health Service Executive.

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

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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.

Food Business Operators 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.

Animal Feedstuffs

685. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he has concerns that there may be a fodder shortage in 2020; the contingency measures he will put in place for the event; if he will prepare a financial support package in advance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7913/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): Over the last decade, Ireland has experienced a number of extreme weather events ranging from the significant cold winter of 2009/2010 through to the extended dry period experienced in the Summer of 2018 which followed a prolonged winter that resulted in a late spring.

2019 proved to be a very good year for grass growth resulting in significant reserves of fodder being available into 2020. In addition, so far this year, based on Teagasc’s PastureBase Ireland grass growth monitoring model, growing conditions have been favourable. As a result of the growing conditions and the good weather, farmers have conserved excellent quality fodder in recent weeks and based on current fodder availability, it is premature to consider a fodder shortfall at this time.

Nevertheless, both I and my officials continue to closely monitor the situation.

Tuberculosis Incidence

686. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of reported tuberculosis cases in each year since 2010; the amount spent on eradication programmes in each year in tabular form; the portion of this funding which came from the EU annually; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7915/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The following table shows the number of reactors and the number of new herd restrictions per year since 2010. Also shown is the amount of actual voted expenditure incurred by my Department over the same period of time, this expenditure does not include staff costs which are estimated annually at circa €25m. These figures do not include farmer contribution towards the cost of the scheme which is estimated at circa €32m annually.

	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010
Herd Incidence	3.72%	3.51%	3.47%	3.27%	3.37%	3.64%	3.88%	4.26%	4.18%	4.65%

Questions - Written Answers

Number of Reactors	17,058	17,491	17,266	16,914	15,317	16,145	15,612	18,476	18,531	20,211
Actual Voted Expenditure ('000)	€37,544	€36,658	€32,570	€30,776	€30,251	€35,556	€31,739	€38,886	€39,799	€40,465
EU Contribution('000) August 2020	€8,250	€8,789	€9,851	€10,445	€10,651	€12,700	€10,221	€11,085	€15,409	€12,043
EU Contribution as a % of voted expenditure	21.97	23.98	30.25	33.94	35.21	35.72	32.20	28.51	38.72	29.76

Hen Harriers

687. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of recipients by county that receive payments under the hen harrier programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7916/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The Hen Harrier Project is operationally independent of my Department and is run by a Hen Harrier Project Team. The information below is sourced from the Project Team.

The breakdown per county of payments made for 2019 breeding season is shown below.

County	Number of participants paid
Clare	300
Cork	207
Galway	251
Kerry	253
Laois	54
Limerick	292
Monaghan	30
Offaly	19
Tipperary	115
Mayo	2
Waterford	2
Total	1,525

Sheep Welfare Scheme

688. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of recipients of the sheep welfare scheme by county; the average payment to each recipient by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7917/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The table below sets out payments by county for Year 3 of the Sheep Welfare Scheme.

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County	Number paid	Amount Paid	Average Payment
Carlow	391	€498,532.60	€1,275.02
Cavan	371	€263,482.10	€710.19
Clare	183	€72,766.10	€397.63
Cork	898	€830,717.17	€925.07
Donegal	3,239	€2,119,939.55	€654.50
Dublin	100	€113,826.00	€1,138.26
Galway	2,216	€1,807,940.84	€815.86
Kerry	1,586	€1,839,107.10	€1,159.59
Kildare	342	€470,866.91	€1,376.80
Kilkenny	276	€313,899.40	€1,137.32
Laois	211	€184,165.28	€872.82
Leitrim	621	€537,384.12	€865.35
Limerick	78	€81,683.10	€1,047.22
Longford	186	€136,212.90	€732.33
Louth	202	€238,832.57	€1,182.34
Mayo	2,729	€2,032,818.12	€744.89
Meath	497	€637,085.07	€1,281.86
Monaghan	189	€139,696.89	€739.14
Offaly	251	€278,982.40	€1,111.48
Roscommon	907	€773,317.80	€852.61
Sligo	810	€623,173.60	€769.35
Tipperary	413	€494,040.70	€1,196.22
Waterford	221	€341,097.40	€1,543.43
Westmeath	357	€335,174.20	€938.86
Wexford	523	€567,323.40	€1,084.75
Wicklow	797	€1,099,897.20	€1,380.05
Total	18,594	€16,831,962.52	€905.24

Question No. 689 answered with Question No. 666.

Meat Processing Plants

690. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he is satisfied that current capacity output will continue at meat processing factories and facilities to meet the commercial demand required for their products in view of the number of positive test results for Covid-19 for employees at these facilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7994/20]

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.

Questions - Written Answers

Officials from my Department and from the Food Business Operators are working closely with the Outbreak Control team to ensure that processing continues in a manner that is consistent with public health advice.

Live Exports

691. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the boat capacity licensed to date for the export of live animals in 2020; if he is satisfied that this capacity is adequate; if not, the plans he has to licence additional capacity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7999/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): In the context of vessels dedicated to the transport of livestock from Ireland, there are currently three such vessels licensed by my Department. The capacity of these vessels depends on the particulars of the consignments being shipped.

My Department has not been made aware of any capacity concerns by exporters.

In relation to the licensing of new ships, any applications for approval are assessed in the normal manner by contacting the Department to arrange inspection of the proposed vessel. My Department will continue to facilitate ship operators and exporters regarding inspections of any new vessels as needed.

Ireland sets a high standard relating to the approval of ships for livestock transport. This approach contributes to maintaining Ireland's reputation as an exporter of livestock of the highest health status.

The Deputy can be assured that my Department will continue to promote and maintain an environment in which live exports can continue in both an economic and sustainable manner, with strong emphasis on the welfare of all animals being exported.

Agriculture Schemes

692. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if agricultural schemes due for payment in 2020 are in line for payment on time in view of the fact that inspections may not be carried out due to Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8057/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): My Department continues to prioritise the issuing of payments under the various schemes available to farmers. For example, GLAS and Organic Farming Scheme balancing payments were recently brought forward by a number of weeks and balancing payments under the Sheep Welfare Scheme also issued recently. Payments under TAMS are also continuing, at an average of €1.3m per week.

I am very conscious of the important role that timely payments under such schemes plays at this challenging time for farmers. The Department expects to be on schedule with its payments in 2020.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

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693. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to introduce a grant similar to the restart grant for livestock marts that had to close during the Covid-19 crisis or were impacted by a 25% reduction in turnover to assist them out of the crisis caused by the pandemic in view of the fact marts are not eligible for the scheme announced by the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, as they are a high turnover-low margin business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8127/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I am acutely aware of the issues presented to the agri-food sector by COVID-19, and 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 31st 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. 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 Income 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 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.

Agriculture Industry

694. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which he continues to liaise with producers in the beef and dairy sectors with a view to ensuring viability in the short term and continued prospects in the future in national and international markets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8191/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): My officials and I have ongoing contact with all the key stakeholders across both the beef and dairy sectors. More than ever in the ongoing response to the Covid-19 pandemic, I am aware of this need for ongoing contact as the situation has evolved. 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 (SMP, 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, includ-

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ing those in the agri-food sector, get access to suitable supports, and the measures in place are being kept under review.

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 meat and dairy sectors to share information on emerging issues and contingency planning, and we will continue to develop appropriate supports as the situation evolves.

Agriculture Industry

695. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which he expects to be in a position to enhance the prospects of the beef and dairy sectors in the future while at the same time complying with carbon reduction targets without damaging the industry and its food production capacity at a time of worldwide concerns regarding food security and availability; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8192/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): While Ireland is internationally recognised as having one of the most carbon efficient systems of dairy and beef production in the EU, there is huge variability in carbon efficiency within the country. The Teagasc Sustainability Survey shows that the top performing third of farms emitted, on average, 9.6 kg CO₂ equivalent per kg beef, compared with 14.9 kg for the bottom performing third of cattle farms. Reducing this variability is a real opportunity to make progress in reducing emissions from cattle production in Ireland with positive economic dividend on the farms concerned. Schemes such as the Beef Data and Genomics Programme (BDGP) and Beef Environmental Efficiency Programme-Sucklers (BEEP-S) are focused on improving the carbon efficiency of the beef herd.

My Department is progressing a draft roadmap called ‘Agclimatise’ which aims to translate the targets in the National Climate Action Plan into more detailed actions with clear performance indicators. Actions proposed for the agricultural sector include: enhancing soil fertility and nutrient efficiency, promoting the use of protected nitrogen products, developing enhanced dairy and breeding programmes and developing a charter with animal feed manufacturers on the crude protein content of livestock. The pathway to delivery is challenging, and will require greater collaboration between farmers, industry, Government and other stakeholders to deliver on-farm impacts.

I am confident that the agriculture sector as a whole will contribute significantly to achieving Ireland’s climate targets and its transition to a low-carbon, climate-resilient economy and society, with collaboration, co-operation and collective responsibility being key in achieving this ambition.

Fishing Industry

696. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which various fish stock at sea and internal waterways have fluctuated over the past five years to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8195/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): The Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) provides the framework for the long term conservation and sustainability of fish stocks around our shores and is designed to ensure the long term sustainability

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of fishing in Ireland and throughout EU waters. The CFP specifically calls for the progressive restoration and maintenance of populations of fish stocks above biomass levels capable of producing Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY). This will lead to healthy fish stocks, higher quotas for both Irish and EU fishermen and to more sustainable fishing patterns.

An important aspect of the work to achieve and maintain MSY is to form a detailed picture of the biological status of the stocks of the stocks which are fished by our fleet. Scientific information on the state of the fisheries exploited by the Irish fleet is compiled by the Marine Institute with data from the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES) and is published in the Stock Book each year. The most recent Stock Book, 2019, contains 74 stocks that are subject to the scientific advice of the Marine Institute. I have attached two tables (Tables 1 and 2) taken from the Stock Book that show the fluctuations of fish stocks over the last five years.

Of these 74 stocks, 35 are assessed as being sustainably fished in 2019. This number has grown every year since 2013. The number of stocks being over-fished has declined from 22 in 2014 to 13 in 2019. In the five year period referred to by the Deputy, the number of stocks fished sustainably has consistently increased, while those over fished have declined. These trends should ultimately lead to healthier fish stocks and higher quotas for Irish fishermen.

Fishing opportunities for each Member State are agreed on an annual basis at the EU Fisheries Council of Ministers on the basis of a proposal produced by the European Commission that is informed by the best available scientific advice. This, in turn, can lead to fluctuations in quotas, both increases and decreases. At the negotiations for 2020 Total Allowable Catches and quotas, there were increases in a number of stocks of importance to Ireland such as Haddock, Monkfish and Megrin in the Celtic Sea. This outcome shows that the many years of intensive, industry-led conservation measures are paying off. I am confident that, through the CFP, we will be able to ensure the sustainability of our fish stocks. This will ensure the economic viability of our fishing fleet and fish processors, thereby supporting the families and communities that depend on a vibrant fishing industry.

Fish stocks in inland waterways fall with the remit of the Department of Communication, Climate Action and the Environment and its agency Inland Fisheries Ireland.

Table 1 Summary of FEAS evaluation of fishing mortality in relation to FMSY for stocks of interest to Ireland.

	2015		2016		2017		2018		2019	
	Num	%								
Pressure status										
Fished Below Fmsy	26	36	28	38	29	39	32	43	35	47
Fished Above Fmsy	19	26	15	20	17	23	16	22	13	18
F Un-known, Fmsy or not defined	27	38	31	42	28	38	26	35	26	35

	2015		2016		2017		2018		2019	
Total Number of Stocks		72		74		74		74		74

Table 2 Summary of FEAS evaluation of SSB in relation to biomass reference points for stocks of interest to Ireland.

	2015		2016		2017		2018		2019	
Stock biomass status	Num	%								
Stock biomass above MSY Btrigger	20	28	22	30	27	36	26	35	25	34
Stock biomass below MSY Btrigger	14	19	19	26	15	20	16	22	15	20
Stock biomass Unknown or undefined	38	53	33	45	32	43	32	43	34	46
Total Number of Stocks	72		74		74		74		74	

Forestry Sector

697. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address the numerous issues raised with him by the forestry industry regarding licences for forestry operations; his views on whether there is a crisis situation in the industry; if so, the way in which he plans to address it; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8240/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): I am aware that there are currently delays to issuing forestry licences and acknowledge that this is causing difficulties for some in the sector. My Department is intensively engaging with all relevant stakeholders on these issues.

The current licensing difficulties are as a result of the changes made to internal Appropriate Assessment Procedures (AAP). These were introduced 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 findings meant that in order to grant licences which fully meet environmental requirements, fundamental changes to the licensing system were unavoidable. As you know, my Department is the forestry licence consent authority and, since 2017, all licence applications are subject to a statutory public notification system.

I accept the current changes to procedures are very significant and they have been challenging to implement such is the scope and breadth of them, which has unfortunately meant that there have been delays in issuing licences. It has taken substantial resources and effort to introduce a robust and workable system, which meets the legislative requirements, and I believe we now have that in place. In order to fully implement this system and to issue licences within accepted timescales, my Department is devoting extra resources to deliver these new procedures, 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.

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- We have engaged external ecological expertise to help with the backlog of files. Four local ecologists have also been contracted provide extra support. Further, an ecology contract with five 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.

To date in 2020, 719 tree felling licences have issued with a volume of 1.8 million m3. In terms of afforestation licences processed, my Department has issued 248 afforestation licences for 1,859ha and 155 forest road works licences for 56km of forest roads, for the year to 22nd May 2020. Furthermore, from January 2018 to the end of March 2020, there are valid afforestation licences for some 3,300ha that have not progressed to planting. I would encourage landowners with valid afforestation licences to plant their land this year. They will then access the premiums available under the Afforestation Grant and Premium Scheme.

I have an unwavering commitment to supporting the forestry sector and this commitment has been borne out during the current pandemic. Forestry licensing has been deemed an essential service during the Covid-19 outbreak. Officials of my Department have continued to work under restricted circumstances, to ensure that forestry licences and payments have issued daily during the health crisis.

I acknowledge that the current situation is challenging, but it is a temporary disruption which, when resolved, will make for a better, more sustainable and fit-for-purpose forestry licensing system for many years to come.

Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme

698. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when applicants under the TAMS grant scheme will be notified of the outcome of their application and the amount being approved; and if an application by persons (details supplied) will be expedited. [8242/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): An application for grant aid under the Young Farmer Capital Investment Scheme of TAMS II was submitted by the above named on 1 October 2019.

The application was approved subject to the terms and conditions of the Scheme. The above named were notified of approval by letter dated 30 December 2019. The approval letter included details of all the approved investments, which are due to be completed by 30 December 2020.

Covid-19 Pandemic

699. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of visits his Department paid for or were directly carried out by vets, public or private, or other inspectors or representatives to meat plants since the outbreak of Covid-19; the reports provided regarding hygiene, health and safety and compliance with public health guidelines; the details of those reports; if those reports indicated concerns in respect of hygiene

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and health and safety in the context of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8278/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Creed): My Department's statutory responsibility in the context of meat plants is to ensure that the DAFM-approved meat plants operate in compliance with the EU's food hygiene legislation, animal health and animal welfare standards.

Approximately 250 veterinary and technical staff from my Department are routinely involved in supervising, regulating and controlling these standards at DAFM approved meat plants. Department veterinary staff resources in meat plants are supplemented by a group of approximately 700 Temporary Veterinary Inspectors, who are Private Veterinary Practitioners contracted by the Department to deliver ante-mortem and post-mortem inspection of animals and poultry in meat plants. A total of 149 meat premises are approved by my Department, with specific approvals for activities including slaughtering, deboning and/or cold storage of cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry. Of these, DAFM has a 'permanent presence' at the 49 premises which slaughter animals and carries out risk-based inspections and controls at the remaining approved meat premises.

In addition, 7 inspectorate and technical staff from my Department's Beef Carcase Classification Division monitor carcase classification in 38 beef and pig premises to ensure that it is in compliance with EU and Irish Legislation.

In relation to inspections carried out by Departmental staff in connection with my Department's statutory responsibilities as outlined above, 406 veterinary inspections were carried out in DAFM approved meat plants in the first quarter of 2020. The number of inspections carried out in the second quarter will not be available until the end of that period. In addition, 208 carcase classification inspections by Beef Carcase Classification Division were carried out in the meat plants up to 22nd May 2020.

As you will be aware, in the context of the pandemic, primary responsibility for public health policy and implementation rests with the Department of Health and the HSE. Responsibility for health and safety in the workplace rests with the Health and Safety Authority, under the auspices of the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation.

As part of the whole of Government response to the pandemic, my Department will continue to contribute to the HSE-chaired National Outbreak Control Team and will provide any support required to the HSE at local and national level. My Department has assisted in the dissemination of the HSE guidance to the DAFM approved meat plants. In addition, my Department has sought an update from plant management on the measures which have been put in place in each plant to implement these guidelines. To this end, along with its statutory role in relation to food safety, animal welfare and animal health, my Department will support the HSE and the Health and Safety Authority in monitoring the effective implementation of the guidance in DAFM-approved meat plants.

Electric Vehicles

700. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment further to Parliamentary Question No. 1006 of 13 May 2020, if he will identify specifically the locations in which new, not replacement, charging points have been established; the way in which his Department determined the location of those new charging points; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7985/20]

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728. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the progress that will be made in installing additional fast charging points for electric vehicles in County Cavan in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7804/20]

729. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the progress that will be made in installing additional fast charging points for electric vehicles in County Monaghan in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7805/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 700, 728 and 729 together.

The Climate Action Plan commits to developing the EV charging network necessary to support the growth of EVs to at least 800,000 by 2030 and set a target for the supply of infrastructure to stay sufficiently ahead of demand. Key Actions in the Climate Action Plan include:

- Commence the ESB Electric Vehicle High Power Charging Infrastructure Development Project, supported by the Climate Action Fund, which will support growth to at least 40,000 electric vehicles

- Include electric vehicle fast chargers as a category eligible for support in the next call for Expressions of Interest from Climate Action Fund

- Expand the Electric Vehicle Home Charger Grant to include shared parking (e.g. in apartment blocks)

- Carry out an updated needs analysis for fast chargers based on a level of 75,000 electric vehicles by 2022, taking into account market developments.

Under the first call for applications from the Climate Action Fund, I approved funding of up to €10 million to support ESB eCars to develop a nationwide, state-of-the-art electric vehicle fast charging network. ESB eCars will also contribute an additional €10 million to support the roll out of this initiative.

More than 50 high power charging hubs are being funded on motorway and national road sites. These hubs will be able to charge between two and eight vehicles simultaneously and are capable of providing up to 100 km of electric driving range in as little as six minutes. In addition to the high power charging hubs, up to 50 locations will also see Standard 22kW AC chargers upgraded to 50kW DC fast chargers, providing additional fast charging capacity around the country.

Since the project began in September 2019, ESB has focused on the replacement of aging problematic chargers in the existing network which results in new charging points being established. Over 140 of these chargers have now been replaced and this work is continuing. In addition, two new multi charger sites were delivered, one each in Kilcullen, Kildare (M9) and the Galway Plaza (M6). These locations will be upgraded to include 150kW chargers once this type of charger is made available by the manufacturer with delivery expected in June following an extensive procurement process.

Since October 2019 three Standard AC chargers have been replaced in County Cavan, with a further ten being replaced in Counties Meath (7) and Monaghan (3).

In the last week with the easing of Covid 19 restrictions standard AC chargers in Kells and Cavan Town have been replaced with new DC Fast chargers, providing much higher charging speeds with further installations planned for Sligo Town, Drogheda, Galway City and Kenmare.

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There are currently two fast chargers and five Standard AC chargers in County Monaghan. Three of these have recently been replaced. No additional fast chargers are planned for Monaghan in the first stage of this project being rolled out by ESB eCars.

More multi-fast charger sites are currently in the planning phase and will be delivered in the coming months. These sites are being selected based on a range of factors including the level of traffic, current charge point usage (if applicable), electrical grid capacity, site host terms of agreement, rest facilities available, accessibility and the physical space at the site for the required equipment.

Covid-19 Pandemic

701. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment when leisure fishing can commence in view of the fact that this can be an individual activity. [8103/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Seán Canney): Angling activity was not ceased but, like other activities considered as exercise, was subject to the advice issued by NPHEM in the context of National measures in relation to Covid-19.

Inland Fisheries Ireland issued angling guidelines on 27 March and updated these guidelines on 5 May, on both occasions, following the advice of NPHEM. Any further revision will again be based on such advice.

I am happy to advise that angling representative bodies have confirmed to me support for the guidelines and continue to encourage their members to comply with all measures advised by NPHEM.

Inland Fisheries Data

702. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the extent to which freshwater fishing rivers and lakes nationwide continue to be restocked on an annual basis; the species most often used in restocking; the degree to which the programme can be extended in 2020 in anticipation of greater demand in the aftermath of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8194/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Seán Canney): Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) is the agency responsible for the conservation, protection, development and improvement of our inland fisheries and sea angling resources. While fish stocking is primarily a matter for fishery owners, IFI has developed and published policy guidelines to which persons undertaking this activity are expected to comply. A copy of these policy guidelines is available on the IFI website: www.fisheriesireland.ie.

These guidelines are designed to ensure compatibility with obligations of EU and National legislation and the principles of International Fishing Organisations to which Ireland is a party. In addition stocking policy is designed, where required, to preserve genetic integrity and to guard against the potential transfer of pathogens. I have provided a direct link to this document below for the Deputy's information.

IFI does manage fish farm operations to support some elements of the angling sector with brown trout and rainbow trout for stocking into a relatively small number of fisheries. In 2019,

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IFI provided 37,000 brown trout and 71,400 rainbow trout for stocking into some recreational angling fisheries.

Provision and sale of fish to customers, which may involve significant movement and travel, ceased on the 24 March in-line with NPHEH advice associated with the Covid-19 issues. Following the government Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, IFI is considering the timing for operations in relation to the supply of fish in current circumstances. I am advised that IFI has sought guidance, via my Department, in relation to the potential impact on the National Covid-19 management efforts, in line with NPHEH advice.

Stocking Guidelines:

www.fisheriesireland.ie/documents/620-ifi-fish-stocking-guidance-document.html.

www.fisheriesireland.ie.

Inland Fisheries

703. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if the Inland Fisheries Act 2010 is not being enforced at the Bohernabreena reservoir, despite representations on the matter from various fishing organisations; and the details of the difficulties being experienced in enforcement of the Act. [8264/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Seán Canney): Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) makes every effort to enforce fisheries legislation at all times at all locations and to respond to reported breaches of this legislation. This includes Bohernabreena Reservoir, which is a drinking water reservoir and fishery controlled by Dublin City Council.

I am advised that this venue is subject to routine IFI fisheries protection patrols and recent enforcement actions have included the issuing of warnings and Fixed Charge Penalty Notices in relation to fisheries offences at the reservoir. It has been the case at times that patrols at this location were deemed unsafe under IFI's Patrol Risk Assessment, however, in the majority of circumstances patrols have proceeded with all relevant risk minimisation measures in place.

As the Deputy will appreciate IFI's enforcement remit is confined to the Fisheries Acts. However, IFI also regularly receives complaints from angling and other stakeholders relating to possible illegal angling activity, often in combination with anti-social and other illegal behaviour in which it has no enforcement vires. IFI also receives calls relating solely to potential public order offences at Bohernabreena Reservoir, all of which are passed on to an Garda Síochána.

IFI has also developed an excellent proactive working relationship with Gardaí, based locally at Tallaght Garda Station, in respect of coordinated enforcement at this location and has received assistance on a number of occasions when mobilising a response to reported illegal activity.

IFI staff intend to meet shortly with Garda members in Tallaght to further develop our collaborative approach to addressing the various issues reported from Bohernabreena Reservoir.

Broadcasting Sector

704. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Ac-

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tion and Environment if he will consider enacting airplay legislation to ensure a requirement that between 30% and 40% of music played would be music produced here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8269/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): While I am supportive of the promotion of Irish music on our broadcasting services, I am conscious that a number of factors must be taken into account when considering the feasibility of introducing airplay quotas. The potential benefit to music production in Ireland must be balanced with the rights of broadcasters, subject to their contractual or regulatory obligations, to determine the type of content they wish to broadcast and to maximise their commercial revenue particularly in the context of the current media climate. Importantly, the introduction of airplay quotas would need to be consistent with EU law.

An example of airplay quotas in the EU can be seen in France. In 1994, France introduced a mandatory quota for 40% airplay of French language music on French radio stations, this quota was reduced to 35% in 2016. Any quota for airplay would be considered to restrict free movement of services by placing music meeting certain criteria in a more advantaged position. However, a quota for airplay of music in a particular language, as is the case in France, can be justified under EU case law, as the preservation and promotion of an official language of a Member State constitutes a general interest objective. Unlike music in a particular language, a quota system for music produced in a particular place, as suggested in this question, does not appear to have grounds for exemption from the general requirements of EU law. Therefore, without a similar justification on the grounds of promoting cultural diversity, a quota for music produced in a particular Member State would be considered to restrict free movement of services by placing music produced in other Member States at a disadvantage.

The government is not currently considering airplay quotas based on production location.

National Broadband Plan

705. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment when broadband will be available in an area (details supplied). [7089/20]

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.

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 in the region of 115,000 premises, with 70,000 - 100,000 passed each year thereafter until rollout is completed. Further details are available at the NBI website www.nbi.ie

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) were identified by Local Authorities 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, local sports facilities and other public places are available to view on the High Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The BCP delivery project is well underway and surveying of the BCP locations is progressing which will facilitate detailed design and installation. BCP locations are subject to change and a number of the premises initially identified are in the process of being replaced with alternative locations. The remaining BCPs remain on track for delivery by the end of 2020.

The BCPs in identified public places 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.

National Broadband Plan

706. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if the possibility of improving poor broadband connectivity in Tinoran, County Wicklow will be investigated (details supplied). [7210/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Question refers to premises that are in the townlands of Tinoran, Co. Wicklow and Moone, Co. Kildare.

A number of these premises are within the BLUE area on the NBP High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website at www.broadband.gov.ie. Within the BLUE area, commercial operators are already providing high speed broadband or have stated their intention to provide high speed broadband in future. My Department defines high speed broadband as a connection with minimum speeds of 30Mbps download and 6Mbps upload. Commercial activities of operators delivering high speed broadband are not planned or funded by the State and my Department has no statutory authority to intervene in that process.

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.

The remaining premises are located within the AMBER area on the NBP High Speed Broadband Map. The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led Intervention which will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 150Mbps from the outset.

The contract for this work was signed with National Broadband Ireland (NBI) last November and by the end of next year, NBI plans to pass in the region of 115,000 premises, with 70,000 - 100,000 passed each year thereafter until rollout is completed. All counties will see premises passed in the next 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State will have access to high speed broadband within the next four years. Further information on deployment activities is available on NBI's website (www.nbi.ie).

To support remote working and connected communities, approximately 300 Broadband

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Connections Points (BCPs) were identified by Local Authorities 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, local sports facilities and other public places are available to view on the High Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The BCP delivery project is well underway and surveying of the BCP locations is progressing which will facilitate detailed design and installation. BCP locations are subject to change and a number of the premises initially identified are in the process of being replaced with alternative locations. The remaining BCPs remain on track for delivery by the end of 2020.

The BCPs in identified public places 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.

Raidió Teilifís Éireann

707. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if additional financial supports have been considered in an ongoing review of supports for RTÉ; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7213/20]

718. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if a request for financial support was made by RTÉ; if his Department is considering additional financial support for RTÉ; and the amount sought by the organisation. [7337/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 707 and 718 together.

RTÉ has suffered significant declines in both TV licence receipts and commercial income as a result of the COVID 19 crisis.

There has been ongoing engagement with RTÉ in relation to the implementation of its revised strategy and the organisation is looking to identify where further savings might be realised. It is also engaging with NewEra (the advisory body to Government on commercial state owned enterprises) on the actions proposed to mitigate the financial impact of the crisis.

It is expected that a report on the matter will be submitted shortly to the Ministers for Communications, Climate Action and Environment and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

Raidió Teilifís Éireann

708. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if he has met with RTÉ between 12 March and 14 May 2020. [7214/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I met with the Director General of RTÉ by videoconference on 8 April, 2020. I also spoke with the Chair of the RTÉ Board by phone on 25 March and 22 April 2020.

Better Energy Homes Scheme

709. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if he accepts the findings of a recent report by the European Court of Auditors on the better energy warmer homes scheme; if the scheme will be reformed in view of the findings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7215/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): My Department funds a number of SEAI grant schemes to help homeowners to improve 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.

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.

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.

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 Warmer Homes 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.

National Broadband Plan

710. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the number of homes passed and the number of homes connected through the national broadband plan to 30 April 2020. [7217/20]

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

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540,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools.

There are a number of stages required to roll out the new high speed broadband network including:-

- survey work to inform detailed designs for each deployment area (over 22k premises are already surveyed);
- the repair and make ready activities conducted by eir to ensure the poles and ducts that are used in each deployment area are fit for purpose;
- the installation of the electronic equipment in each exchange building for each deployment area;
- the activation of the backhaul connectivity to each exchange building ;
- the development of NBI IT systems that allow operator place orders and schedule connections etc;
- the laying of the physical fibre along the poles and ducts;and
- if an order is placed the activation of the final connection to the actual premises.

NBI are working to ensure these activities are implemented, by mobilising their own staff and ramping up their capacity to deliver the project, including through multiple subcontractor procurements. While many of these activities are underway, the deployment of fibre to pass homes is a Q4 2020 activity and the first homes passed will be able to get connected before the end of this year. By the end of next year, NBI plans to pass in the region of 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.

Further details on deployment activities and progress with the roll out are available on the NBI website at www.nbi.ie.

To support remote working and connected communities, approximately 300 Broadband Connections Points (BCPs) were identified by Local Authorities 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, local sports facilities and other public places are available to view on the High Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie . The BCP delivery project is well underway and surveying of the BCP locations is progressing which will facilitate detailed design and installation. BCP locations are subject to change and a number of the premises initially identified are in the process of being replaced with alternative locations. The remaining BCPs remain on track for delivery by the end of 2020.

The BCPs in identified public places 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.

Plastic Bag Levy

711. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and

Environment if there are impediments to increasing the plastic bag levy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7218/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): In November 2019, I set out potential changes to the plastic bag levy in a consultation paper relating to new environmental levy proposals. A copy of this paper is available at www.dccae.gov.ie/en-ie/environment/consultations/Pages/Public-Consultation-on-the-Proposed-Introduction-of-new-Environmental-Levies.aspx.

As set out in that consultation, it is proposed to increase the plastic bag levy from the current rate of 22 cent to 25 cent, and to remove the exemption from the plastic bag levy currently enjoyed by medium weight plastic bags which are sold for 70 cent or more. True ‘bag for life’ bags will remain exempt.

The arrangements to amend the rate of the levy are set out in Section 72(3) of the Waste Management Act, 1996, as amended. In line with these arrangements, such amendments may be made by Statutory Instrument, within defined parameters including reference to the Consumer Price Index. Currently, the maximum increase possible within these parameters is in the order of 3 cent.

Work is currently on-going on the further development of these proposals, including having regard to the submissions received via the consultation process.

Environmental Policy

712. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment his views on the introduction of a levy on the use of single use plastics; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7219/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Government has committed to tackling the problems associated with single use plastics and strongly supported the introduction at EU Level of Directive (EU) 2019/904 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 June 2019 on the reduction of the impact of certain plastic products on the environment, commonly referred to as the Single Use Plastic Directive. I am committed to transposing and implementing this Directive at the earliest possible date. This Directive gives me the power to ban certain single use items from being placed on the market, including polystyrene food and beverage containers, plastic cutlery and plates, straws and balloon sticks. I will also be introducing measures to significantly reduce our reliance on typical on-the-go items such as single use food and beverage containers. I am currently exploring what measures, including the possible introduction of levies, will best deliver on this ambition.

The Climate Action Plan committed to looking at a number of possible environmental levies, including a possible levy on single use plastics, as part of the review of the Environment Fund. In the context of proposed levies, my Department published a consultation paper in late 2019 which outlined proposals with regard to environmental levies. This is available on my Department’s website at www.DCCAE.gov.ie. This consultation was designed to help inform the development of a new range of environmental levies on a phased basis over the period 2020-2025, aimed at encouraging positive environmental behavioural change and climate action. Work is currently on-going on the further development of the levies including having regard to the submissions received.

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Waste Management

713. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if the closure of workplaces has led to an increase in the production of non-recyclable waste; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7220/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): In an effort to ensure that all waste collections, both household and commercial, continue during the Covid-19 pandemic my Department established a Covid-19 High Level Waste Advisory Group consisting of key stakeholders from industry, the local authority sector and regulatory bodies. This Group, in cooperation with all elements of the waste industry, has helped to ensure that there have been no interruptions to waste collection services to date.

Due to the measures introduced to limit the spread of the virus there has been a significant increase in the volume of household waste arising; this has been offset by decreases in the volume of commercial waste generated.

The Regional Waste Management Planning Offices report that volumes of non-recycled waste managed by the sector continue to be broadly in line with expectations.

Departmental Data

714. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the units in his Department currently working remotely; the units still in situ; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7221/20]

715. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the activities of his Department which have been curtailed as a result of the transition to working from home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7222/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 714 and 715 together.

All Divisions in my Department commenced working remotely following the announcement in March of national requirements to work from home, where possible, to combat Covid 19.

In line with the Roadmap for Re-opening Society and Business, staff are continuing to work remotely. However, along with all Government Departments, my Department is making preparations for the implementation of the Return to Work Safely Protocol to allow for a phased, and safe, return to our offices over the coming months.

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic my Department has worked to minimise the impact on the sectors of the economy for which it has policy responsibility. While staff in the Department continue to focus on the delivery of business priorities set out in our Statement of Strategy, the Deputy will appreciate that it has been challenging to continue to provide a 'business as usual service' in all respects. For example:

- A number of meetings, events and public engagement activities have been cancelled or deferred.

- The Geological Survey of Ireland (GSI) field programmes including the Tellus mapping programme, Geological Mapping, Groundwater fieldwork and the INFOMAR inshore marine

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mapping are currently being delayed or temporarily postponed as new COVID19 Standard Operating Procedures are finalised.

- Retrofit activity supported by SEAI grant schemes has been suspended due to COVID-19 related restrictions but will recommence in line with national guidance.

Just Transition Commissioner

716. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if he has met with the Just Transition Commissioner between 1 March and 7 May 2020. [7223/20]

717. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if the just transition measures have been progressed to assist workers at Bord na Móna. [7336/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 716 and 717 together.

I published the progress report of the Just Transition Commissioner, Mr Kieran Mulvey, together with an initial response of the Government to the Commissioner's report and progress update on relevant measures, on Friday 22 May.

The Commissioner's report reflects a comprehensive engagement with relevant stakeholders in the region, including local community organisations, Bord na Móna, ESB, the Midlands Transition Team, Local Authorities, public representatives, and relevant trade unions and workers' representatives. The report sets out the Commissioner's analysis of the challenges facing the Midlands region, and for Bord na Móna workers and their families and communities, arising from an accelerated exit from peat harvesting. The report also contains a number of important recommendations. The Government is already acting on a number of these and is committed to preparing a detailed implementation plan to address the remainder. A copy of the report and Government's initial response is available on my Department's website at dcae.gov.ie.

I have met the Just Transition Commissioner on a number of occasions since his appointment by me in November 2019, including most recently on 16 March and 12 May, both of which took place by tele-conference. At these meetings, the Commissioner took the opportunity to update me on progress in his work and to brief me on the recommendations contained in his report, respectively.

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 ESB agreeing to contribute an additional €5 million to this fund. The Government is also examining 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.

In relation to the Just Transition Fund, I have now launched a first call for proposals for funding. Stage 1 of accessing the Just Transition Fund is to register your project with the Midlands Regional Transition Team and START (Secretariat Technical Assistance to Regions in Transition) on www.midlandsireland.ie. In Stage 2, my Department will launch a detailed eval-

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uation process for projects that have applied under Stage 1.

I have previously set out five key priorities for this fund as follows:

- retraining and reskilling workers to assist local communities and businesses in the Midlands to adjust to the low carbon transition;
- proactive communications with affected communities and other stakeholders in the region and between local communities and the relevant national institutions;
- best practice sharing networks and frameworks;
- the early development of local transition plans, with local communities at the core of plan development, based on economic analysis and local scoping of transition impacts and the opportunities it presents, acknowledging that the needs of individual areas across the Midlands will differ; and
- innovation and investment proposals to generate sustainable employment in green enterprise that do not come within the ambit of the four Project Ireland 2040 Funds, or the State's other investment programmes.

Question No. 718 answered with Question No. 707.

National Broadband Plan

719. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the reason residents on the N52 outside Mullingar, County Westmeath (details supplied) cannot avail of broadband. [7372/20]

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.

The area referred to in the Question has premises which fall within the AMBER and BLUE areas on the High Speed Broadband Map which is available at www.broadband.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).

The BLUE area represents those areas where commercial providers are either delivering or have plans to deliver high speed broadband services. There may be a choice of operators offering a service in the area referred to and further information in this regard is available at www.comreg.ie/compare/#!/services.

Under the State led intervention, all counties, including Co. Westmeath, 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 in the region of 115,000 premises, with 70,000 - 100,000 passed each year thereafter until rollout is completed. Further information on deployment activities is available on NBI's website (www.nbi.ie).

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 led 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) were identified by Local Authorities 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, local sports facilities and other public places are available to view on the High Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The BCP delivery project is well underway and surveying of the BCP locations is progressing which will facilitate detailed design and installation. BCP locations are subject to change and a number of the premises initially identified are in the process of being replaced with alternative locations. The remaining BCPs remain on track for delivery by the end of 2020.

The BCPs in identified public places 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.

Energy Conservation

720. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the position regarding persons who are seeking a grant towards cladding insulation for their house but may have received a very small grant up to ten years ago to pump walls for insulation and are now being refused the grant that could be approximately up to €6,000 due to the fact they may have received a grant of approximately €400 many years ago; if he will consider reviewing this matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7388/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Better Energy Homes scheme aims to improve energy efficiency by providing grant support for energy efficiency upgrades to homeowners whose homes were built prior to 2006. It is funded by my Department and administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). The aim of the scheme is to improve the energy efficiency of our built environment in a way which represents the best possible use of Exchequer funding. I have no function with regard to individual grant applications.

The rules applicable to the scheme indicate that a home cannot receive grant funding twice for the same energy efficiency measure. This is outlined in section 1.4 of the scheme application guide which states: *“The measure being applied for must be for newly fitted materials/products and cannot have been incentivised previously in the particular home under any other grant programme.”* And again, in point 10 of the Terms and Conditions: *“The applicant vouches that measures applied for have not already been supported by other government schemes or by SEAI through Better Energy Homes or other schemes.”*

In the case raised by the Deputy, it appears that the home has already received a grant for wall insulation and therefore is not eligible to receive another grant for any other form of wall insulation.

The rationale for this policy is that applying a second form of wall insulation to a home that has already received another form of wall insulation would result in a lesser amount of energy savings being delivered. This ensures that the funding available for energy efficiency is priori-

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tised to where it has the most impact.

SEAI grant schemes are kept under ongoing review.

Postal Services

721. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if the provision of an Eircode postcode for a person (details supplied) will be expedited in view of the fact the person has been informed it will take until August 2020 to be provided with same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7456/20]

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 licensed 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.

An Post have informed my officials they are currently updating the individuals address data on their systems and this information should then be issued from An Post GeoDirectory to Eircode. My Department has requested Eircode to contact and liaise directly with the individual in question regarding the assignment of an Eircode for this new property address.

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.

Better Energy Homes Scheme

722. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the timeframe in place to allow previous participants of SEAI to avail of the better energy warmer homes scheme under the delivery of free energy efficiency improvements to their homes in view of the fact they only availed of one aspect of the scheme previously, for example, the insulation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7459/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme is funded by my Department and administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). The scheme delivers a range of energy efficiency measures free of charge to low income households vulnerable to energy poverty.

The Warmer Homes Scheme budget allocation for 2020 is €52.8 million - a record level of funding for this scheme.

The aim of the scheme is to deliver efficiency measures in a way which represents the best

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possible use of Exchequer funding. The rules of the Scheme stipulate that repeat upgrade visits are not provided. This rule is in place to ensure that the available Exchequer funding provides upgrades to as many eligible homes as possible and to prioritise eligible homes that have never had any work completed under the scheme.

Demand for the scheme is extremely high, reflecting the shift to deeper measures, and is impacted by longer delivery times associated with these types of works and the available budget. The homeowners on this waiting list have never received any form of free upgrade from SEAI under the scheme.

The Climate Action Plan commits to reviewing ways to improve how current energy poverty schemes target those most in need. This review is near completion and considers the issue of revisits for additional works.

It is important to note that the current public health emergency has meant that the scheme is not carrying out works on homes at present. This necessary pause in activity will add to the waiting times for homeowners who are due to receive works.

National Broadband Plan

723. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the status of the national broadband plan; when work will commence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7460/20]

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.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) contract was signed with National Broadband Ireland (NBI) in November 2019, 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 in the region of 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.

NBI contractors commenced survey work in January to inform the detailed designs needed for each deployment area. Further information on deployment activities can be found on the NBI website www.nbi.ie.

To support remote working and connected communities, approximately 300 Broadband Connections Points (BCPs) were identified by Local Authorities 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, local sports facilities and other public places are available to view on the High Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The BCP delivery project is well underway and surveying of the BCP locations is progressing which will facilitate detailed design and installation. BCP locations are subject to change and a number of the premises initially identified are in the process of being replaced with alternative locations. The remaining BCPs remain on track for delivery by the end of 2020.

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The BCPs in identified public places 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.

National Broadband Plan

724. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the position regarding the national broadband plan; and if the recent increases in demand for broadband particularly in rural areas has changed the focus of the delivery of the plan. [7470/20]

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.

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 in the region of 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.

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. The first homes passed will be able to get connected before the end of this year. Further information on deployment activities associated with the roll out can be found on the NBI website www.nbi.ie.

To support remote working and connected communities, approximately 300 Broadband Connections Points (BCPs) were identified by Local Authorities 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, local sports facilities and other public places are available to view on the High Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The BCP delivery project is well underway and surveying of the BCP locations is progressing which will facilitate detailed design and installation. BCP locations are subject to change and a number of the premises initially identified are in the process of being replaced with alternative locations. The remaining BCPs remain on track for delivery by the end of 2020.

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Energy Conservation

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725. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the reason for the delay in the provision of the SEAI retrofitting grant to a person (details supplied). [7502/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme is funded by my Department and administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI).

Individual applications to the Warmer Homes Scheme are an operational matter for the SEAI and as Minister I have no role in such matters. However in reference to the case raised by the Deputy, I have been informed by the SEAI that the application is currently assigned to a Contractor.

In normal circumstances, the next step would be that the Contractor would contact the homeowner directly to arrange a mutually convenient appointment. However, while noting that the Government's Roadmap permits a phased return of outdoor workers in phase 1 (18 May 2020), the SEAI has determined that grant-aided home upgrade works could not be successfully undertaken without contravening the guidelines. The situation is being reviewed by the SEAI in the context of guidelines for Phase 2.

National Broadband Plan

726. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment when homes and businesses in County Limerick with inadequate broadband will receive an improvement in service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7506/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton) (Deputy Richard Bruton): The government is committed to delivering high speed broadband to every home, farm, business and school in Ireland.

The High Speed Broadband Map, which is available at www.broadband.gov.ie, shows the areas in Limerick which will be included in the National Broadband Plan (NBP) as well as areas targeted by commercial operators. The Map is colour coded and searchable by address and Eircode.

- Premises in the AMBER area of Limerick will be provided with high speed broadband through the State led Intervention, the contract for which was signed in November last with National Broadband Ireland (NBI).

- The BLUE area represents those areas where commercial providers are either currently delivering or have plans to deliver high speed broadband services.

- The LIGHT BLUE area represents eir's commercial rural deployment plans to rollout high speed broadband to 300,000 premises, including Limerick, as part of a Commitment Agreement signed with my Department in April 2017.

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 in the region of 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.

Design work is being undertaken in targeted townlands in a number of counties, including

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Limerick. Over 22,000 premises have been surveyed to date and this work is continuing. Further information on deployment activities associated with the roll out can be found on the NBI website www.nbi.ie.

To support remote working and connected communities, approximately 300 Broadband Connections Points (BCPs) were identified by Local Authorities 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, local sports facilities and other public places are available to view on the High Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The BCP delivery project is well underway and surveying of the BCP locations is progressing which will facilitate detailed design and installation. BCP locations are subject to change and a number of the premises initially identified are in the process of being replaced with alternative locations. The remaining BCPs remain on track for delivery by the end of 2020.

The BCPs in identified public places 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.

National Broadband Plan

727. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment when fibre broadband will be delivered to an area (details supplied). [7674/20]

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 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.

Questions Nos. 728 and 729 answered with Question No. 700.

National Broadband Plan

730. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the specific details on the deployment of fibre broadband in County Tipperary; the number of properties in the county supplied with broadband to date in 2020; the number of properties in the county which will be supplied with broadband from now until the end of 2020; and the date the deployment plan will be made available by NBI. [7998/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The High Speed Broadband Map, which is available at www.broadband.gov.ie, shows the areas targeted by commercial operators to provide high speed broadband services and the areas that will be included in the State intervention area under the National Broadband Plan (NBP). The Map is colour coded and searchable by address and Eircode.

- Premises in the AMBER area will be provided with high Speed Broadband through the

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State led Intervention, the contract for which was signed in November last with National Broadband Ireland (NBI).

- The BLUE area represents those areas where commercial providers are either currently delivering or have plans to deliver high speed broadband services.

- The LIGHT BLUE area represents eir's commercial rural deployment plans to rollout high speed broadband to 300,000 premises as part of a Commitment Agreement signed with my Department in April 2017.

The following table outlines the latest data on the number of premises in Tipperary where access to a high speed broadband connection is, or will be, delivered by commercial operators (BLUE/LIGHT BLUE) and those where access will be delivered under the State led intervention (AMBER).

County	AMBER Premises within the NBP State Intervention Area	BLUE Premises within Commercial Operator's Area	LIGHT BLUE Premises within eir's commercial rural deployment
Tipperary	35% (29,647)	62% (52,258)	3% (2,126)

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. There are a number of stages required to roll out the new high speed broadband network including:-

- survey work to inform detailed designs for each deployment area (over 22k premises are already surveyed);

- the repair and make ready activities conducted by eir to ensure the poles and ducts that are used in each deployment area are fit for purpose;

- the installation of the electronic equipment in each exchange building for each deployment area;

- the activation of the backhaul connectivity to each exchange building ;

- the development of NBI IT systems that allow operator place orders and schedule connections etc;

- the laying of the physical fibre along the poles and ducts; and

- if an order is placed the activation of the final connection to the actual premises.

NBI are working to ensure these activities are implemented, by mobilising their own staff and ramping up their capacity to deliver the project, including through multiple subcontractor procurements. While many of these activities are underway, the deployment of fibre to pass homes is a quarter four activity and the first homes passed will be able to get connected before the end of this year. By the end of next year, NBI plans to pass in the region of 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.

Further details on deployment activities and progress with the roll out are available on the

NBI website at www.nbi.ie.

To support remote working and connected communities, approximately 300 Broadband Connections Points (BCPs) were identified by Local Authorities 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, local sports facilities and other public places are available to view on the High Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The BCP delivery project is well underway and surveying of the BCP locations is progressing which will facilitate detailed design and installation. BCP locations are subject to change and a number of the premises initially identified are in the process of being replaced with alternative locations. The remaining BCPs remain on track for delivery by the end of 2020.

The BCPs in identified public places 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.

Renewable Energy Generation

731. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment his views on whether afforestation, the use of bog land carbon repositories and wind generated electricity can each contribute to carbon reduction with a view to improving the progress in line with international agreements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8119/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Government's Climate Action Plan identifies how Ireland will achieve its 2030 targets by reducing carbon emissions by 35% and puts us on a trajectory which would be consistent with net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Afforestation, the use of bog land carbon repositories, and wind generated electricity can each contribute to carbon reduction.

Forestry provides verifiable removal and storage of CO₂ from the atmosphere and will help in meeting our EU commitments over the period 2021 to 2030. The Climate Action Plan sets a target of an average of 8,000 hectares per annum of newly planted forest between 2021 to 2030.

Bogs also play a vital role, *inter alia*, in mitigating climate change effects. This is recognised in the 2019 Climate Action Plan, which includes a range of actions including the development of further measures to help rehabilitate exploited and degraded peatlands. The Government announced in Budget 2020 that €5m would be made available for bog restoration and rehabilitation which will restore bogs to their natural habitat and help to capture carbon. With the injection of this funding, the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht intends to restore over 1,800 hectares of protected raised bog. An expanded bog restoration is also under development with Bord na Mona.

The Climate Action Plan sets out a target of moving to 70% renewable electricity by 2030 which would reduce emissions to 4-5 MtCO₂eq annually. Both offshore and onshore wind are expected to contribute significantly to decarbonisation of the electricity sector. In 2018, wind generated electricity alone avoided 3.1 million tonnes of CO₂ according to the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland.

National Broadband Plan

732. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment when fibre broadband will be available in an area (details supplied). [8121/20]

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. The Question refers to premises 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 in the region of 115,000 premises, with 70,000 - 100,000 passed each year thereafter until rollout is completed.

Further information on deployment activities associated with the roll out are available on NBI's website (www.nbi.ie).

To support remote working and connected communities, approximately 300 Broadband Connections Points (BCPs) were identified by Local Authorities 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, local sports facilities and other public places are available to view on the High Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The BCP delivery project is well underway and surveying of the BCP locations is progressing which will facilitate detailed design and installation. BCP locations are subject to change and a number of the premises initially identified are in the process of being replaced with alternative locations. The remaining BCPs remain on track for delivery by the end of 2020.

The BCPs in identified public places 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.

National Broadband Plan

733. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment when the property at a location (details supplied) is planned to be surveyed under the National Broadband Plan. [8156/20]

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. The Question refers to premises 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).

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Design work is being undertaken in targeted townlands in a number of counties, including Westmeath. Over 22,000 premises have been surveyed to date and this work is continuing. Further details regarding deployment activities associated with the roll out, including surveying activities, are available at the NBI website www.nbi.ie.

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 in the region of 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) were identified by Local Authorities 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, local sports facilities and other public places are available to view on the High Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The BCP delivery project is well underway and surveying of the BCP locations is progressing which will facilitate detailed design and installation. BCP locations are subject to change and a number of the premises initially identified are in the process of being replaced with alternative locations. The remaining BCPs remain on track for delivery by the end of 2020.

The BCPs in identified public places 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.

Renewable Energy Generation

734. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the degree to which he continues to promote carbon reduction policies including the generation of electricity from non-fossil fuel sources; the extent to which non-fossil fuel sources currently supply the national grid as a percentage of total electricity production; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8193/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Richard Bruton): The Climate Action Plan sets out how Ireland will achieve its 2030 greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets and cut emissions by 35%, and put Ireland on a trajectory consistent with net zero carbon emissions by 2050. A key part of the Plan is a move to 70% renewable electricity by 2030 through, *inter alia*,

- at least 3.5 GW of offshore renewable energy
- up to 1.5 GW of grid-scale solar energy
- up to 8.2 GW of onshore wind capacity

The Plan includes a number of actions to deliver this target, including regulatory streamlining of renewables and grid development; development of the offshore renewables sector; implementation of the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS); and development of an enabling framework for micro-generation.

The Sustainable Energy Authority Ireland (SEAI) have calculated that at the end of 2018,

33.3% of electricity demand was met by renewable sources. The provisional figure for 2019 is 36.6%.

Tourist Accommodation

735. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when the operational guidelines regarding capacity and the use of facilities for guests will be made available and notified to the owners of self-catering holiday accommodation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7076/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): 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.

Guidance in relation to specific sectors of the economy should in the first instance be sought from the Government Department with responsibility for that sector.

Motor Tax

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736. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when motor tax offices will reopen; and the arrangements for taxing of cars in place during the coming period. [7536/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The online motor tax service, www.motortax.ie, through which 77% of all motor tax applications were transacted last year, continues to operate. Motor tax offices are also continuing to process postal applications in the various offices around the country. It is not possible, at this stage, to give a definitive date for the opening of public counters in motor tax offices, which will be a matter for local management in line with government advice.

Tourism Industry

737. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has engaged with the tourism industry including package operators and hoteliers on the implementation of a mandatory 14-day quarantine period of international arrivals to Ireland. [7581/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Tourism is one of the most directly affected sectors in the current crisis. The impact of COVID-19 on tourism globally has been overwhelming and immediate with unprecedented consequences for Ireland's tourism sector.

Since late February, Minister Griffin and I, along with my Department officials have engaged with industry with a view to understanding the challenges facing the sector. We established and participate in the COVID-19 Tourism Monitoring Group. This group, made up of industry stakeholders, the tourism agencies and Department officials, has been engaged in monitoring the impact of the Covid crisis on the sector.

Minister Griffin and I have also 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 will consult as appropriate with various elements within the tourism sector in order to inform the Recovery Plan.

As regards the 14-day self-isolation regime for passengers arriving from overseas, this is a matter for the Minister for Health in the first instance. I will continue to engage with colleagues in Government, as will my officials, with regard to the impact on tourism of public health measures introduced in response to Covid-19.

Motor Tax

738. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the position regarding motor tax payments for those that have been cocooning since March 2020 due to Covid-19; the rebate options open to them; and the details of same. [7818/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): In relation to refunds, the relevant legislation provides for a refund of motor tax in certain limited circumstances, where:

- a vehicle has been scrapped or destroyed;

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- 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.

There are no plans currently to amend the legislation to extend the grounds for the granting of a refund.

The Deputy should note that there is a facility in place to declare a vehicle off the road if a vehicle is not going to be 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 using the following form: www.gov.ie/en/publication/4df54e-declaration-of-non-use-of-a-vehicle/.

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

739. Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if there is specific guidance issued for taxi and minibus companies for reopening their businesses; if drivers will be expected to use specified PPE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7894/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): In recognition of the economic, social and logistical importance of the overall transport sector, Government designated it among the essential services to continue during the Covid-19 health emergency. Public transport, including the small public service vehicle (SPSV) industry, remains an important service for those it has continued to carry, including essential workers and those making necessary journeys, and it will continue to play an important role in supporting Government's *Roadmap to Reopening Society and Business* in the weeks and months ahead.

The National Transport Authority (NTA), as the statutory regulator for the 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. The NTA are also engaging with public transport operators to determine the practical implications for public transport provision

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as COVID-19 restrictions are eased in Ireland.

Given the role of the NTA as regulator, I have referred your question to the Authority for direct reply to you. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within 10 working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic

740. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when dive schools can reopen. [8099/20]

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.

The Roadmap differentiates between outdoor and indoor sporting activity. Subject to compliance with the various public health restrictions and conditions attaching to each phase, both phases one and two of the Roadmap provide for the return of certain outdoor sports and physical activities. It is however necessary for each sporting body to prepare a detailed protocol setting out the manner in which it proposes to achieve compliance with the restrictions applicable to each phase.

In the case of dive schools, this responsibility is to be discharged by The Irish Underwater Council as the National Governing Body for recreational underwater sports in Ireland. I have established an Expert Group on Return to Sport, which will provide guidance to the sporting bodies on a phase by phase basis so that they can prepare for the phased return to sporting activity in line with the Government Roadmap.

Covid-19 Pandemic

741. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if a response will issue to the safety requests from bus and rail unions regarding the compulsory use of masks on public transport as the lockdown resulting from Covid-19 continues. [7071/20]

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 have continued to operate during the pandemic. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has been working with all transport operators to ensure service continuity, and in this they continue to be guided by the public health advice, including in relation to enhanced cleaning regimes and social distancing measures across the network.

On Friday 15 May, in the context of announcing the first phase of re-openings under the Government's *Roadmap to Re-opening Society and Business*, the Taoiseach announced new public health advice arising from the considerations of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and presented in a letter from the Chief Medical Officer to the Minister for Health (and published online). The public health advice recommends that members of the public wear face coverings when they are using busy public transport or are in enclosed indoor public areas such as retail outlets. This is recommended as an additional hygiene measure. This public health advice takes the form of a recommendation; it is not mandatory.

Covid-19 Pandemic

742. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he is satisfied with the response rate and failure to fill in self-quarantine documentation of those arriving at air and seaports; and the way in which he plans to respond to these failures and minimalist measures that are being ignored. [7073/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As you are no doubt aware, 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 (NPHE) 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.

Consumer Rights

743. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his attention has been drawn to ongoing issues regarding school tours and parents being unable to claim refunds from travel agencies (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7088/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I am aware of difficulties across the travel sector in relation to refunds to customers and that in some instances travel companies such as travel agents may be offering vouchers or similar in respect to refund claims from customers for travel services impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, including school tours.

The EU law is clear relating to refunds for package holidays. Under the EU Package Travel Directive customers retain their right to a cash refund in circumstances where their holiday cannot proceed due to 'unavoidable or extraordinary circumstances', if they do not wish to re-schedule for a later date or accept an alternative package. Travel agents and tour operators are required under the Directive to refund customer within 14 days of the customer requesting to cancel a package holiday.

At the same time, I am also aware that travel agents and tour operators are having difficulties themselves securing refunds from their suppliers, including airlines, and it is clear that the unprecedented scale of the impact of Covid-19 has affected the capacity of the sector to respond as it should. Whilst consumers are entitled to a cash refund, the Government has agreed to provide protection for credit notes or vouchers issued by travel agents and tour operators, if their customers agree to accept them. Under the scheme, for which legal provisions are being drafted, the State will guarantee the cash value of any such voucher - to be known as a Refund Credit Note - which can be used at a later date to rebook or can be redeemed for cash in 6 months. The idea is to give the sector some breathing space, subject on customer agreement, and it reflects recommendations made by the EU Commission. All parties - customers and travel agents - are feeling the financial impact of Covid, and the Government is trying to provide a way that gives everyone some assurance.

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National Driver Licensing Service

744. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding the NDLS. [7100/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As Minister, I have no power to intervene in individual cases.

I understand that the individual to whom the Deputy refers had a learner permit which expired in 2015, and due to the passage of time is required to begin the process again, by taking a driver theory test. As with other services, driver theory tests are currently suspended. Although the contractor is making plans to clear the inevitable backlog of applications, a date has not yet been confirmed as to when their offices can reopen, and they will only do so when they can ensure that all Covid-19 related restrictions in place at that time can be strictly adhered to.

It is not currently possible to carry out the driver theory tests remotely online, as it is vital that the identify of the candidate can be established, and that there is no possibility of fraud in relation to the taking of the test itself.

While I appreciate the inconvenience caused to people by the suspension of services, 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.

Driver Test

745. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when driver tests will resume; the support that will be provided to those persons on learner permits and are disadvantaged financially and socially by not being able to drive their car without a qualified driver with them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7105/20]

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. Those on learner permits can continue to use this time to practise their driving, once they have a suitably qualified driver with them at all times.

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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.

Ministerial Meetings

746. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of times he formally met with either the chairperson and or the CEO of Dublin Bus, Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7106/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I had one such formal meeting, with the Chairperson and the Chief Executive of Bus Éireann on 14 May 2020. I am regularly briefed by my Department about matters in all the companies, and my Department has frequent engagement with them on both a scheduled and ad hoc basis.

Cycling Facilities Data

747. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the estimated cost of providing 25 bicycle parking racks for a public place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7107/20]

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.

Bus Services

748. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to extend the bus service to Clonaugh, Maynooth, County Kildare in view of the local demand for such a bus service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7141/20]

749. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if provision can be made to provide a daily bus service from Ardclough to Celbridge, County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7142/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 748 and 749 together.

As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport in Ireland. The issues raised are matters for the National

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Transport Authority (NTA) in conjunction with the relevant transport operator and I have forwarded the Deputy's questions to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic

750. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the safety measures and support measures that will obtain for private contract school transport coaches with regard to Covid-19 when the schools reopen in September. [7147/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The School Transport Scheme comes under the remit of my colleague the Minister for Education and Skills. Bus services outside that scheme are part of the overall public transport sector.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) is working with public transport operators (both public and private) who are implementing public health advice in relation to issues such as cleaning regimes and social distancing measures designed to limit the risk of spreading Covid-19. The public health advices apply across all public transport. The recently announced 'Return to Work Safely Protocol' also sets out the steps and processes employers and workers must take to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 in the workplace.

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 commercial bus operators are facing. 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.

Driver Test

751. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if emergency driver test appointments will be provided for persons whose planned driver tests were cancelled due to Covid-19 and who are carers of adults or children with special needs, which makes urgent their need to be able to drive legally; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7160/20]

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.

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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 Road Safety Authority has always operated a system whereby a number of appointment slots are reserved each week for those who require a test urgently, and this facility will continue to be provided once driving tests have resumed.

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.

Driver Test

752. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will urgently implement a plan to ensure that driver tests will resume without delay to avoid undue discrimination on drivers in rural areas with no other forms of transport; if he cannot implement a plan to recommence driver tests, if he will allow leniency for drivers that are awaiting a test and have completed their essential driver training to allow them travel to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7203/20]

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.

Studies have repeatedly shown that unaccompanied learner drivers are markedly more likely to be involved in fatal collisions. For that reason, there can be no exceptions to the current laws in force around learner drivers. Regrettably, there has been an increase in fatalities on our roads so far in 2020, and we must not relax the standards required of our drivers before being awarded a driving licence, even in the case of frontline workers.

An unaccompanied learner driver who is stopped by an Garda Síochána may face penalty points, a fixed charge, seizure of the vehicle and possible prosecution.

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.

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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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

753. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the phase boat rentals in harbour areas fall under the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. [7235/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Under Phase 1 of the Roadmap to Recovery which commenced on Monday 18 May, people are permitted to engage in outdoor sporting and fitness activities on an individual basis. Very small groups – a maximum of four people - are also permitted to engage in outdoor sporting and fitness activity only where there is no physical contact and social distancing of 2 metres can be maintained. However, you are not permitted to travel more than 5kms from your home until Phase 2 commences, which is currently scheduled to commence on 8 June.

Members of the public are also advised to use caution if engaged in water sports, realising there are no lifeguards on the beaches, and many swimming spots are closed off to prevent gatherings, i.e. social distancing.

It is a commercial matter for individual businesses as to when they open depending on the demand from the public arising within the limits of each Phase of the Roadmap.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

754. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to aid the rural tourism sector in County Wexford; the way he plans to identify recovery steps for the rural tourism sector nationally; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7266/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): As the Deputy will be aware, 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 including Wexford and rural tourism, for the period 2020-2023. The Taskforce may consult with stakeholders to inform its deliberations and report back later this year.

The development of the tourism industry is an operational matter for Fáilte Ireland. I have referred the Deputy's question to Fáilte Ireland for further information and for direct reply. Please contact my private office if you do not hear from them within ten working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

755. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will consider rolling out extra measures in addition to a moratorium on business debt beyond the measures currently in place to ensure that transport companies in the tourism sector that are vital to same can survive. [7271/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I am aware that businesses across many sectors, including transport and tourism, are deeply affected by the Covid-19 public health emergency. 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.

My Department has been engaged with the Tourism sector since February in relation to the impacts of Covid. 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.

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*.

The question of moratorium on business debt would be a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

756. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the assistance that is being put in place to assist taxi drivers in getting back to work after the Covid-19 restrictions are lifted; if these workers will be entitled to financial assistance to help them get back to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7291/20]

788. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans and the plans of the taxi regulator to assist taxi drivers to return to the workplace as Covid-19 restrictions are lifted in the coming period. [7538/20]

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811. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the support measures made available for taxi drivers who are faced with insurance costs, loan repayments and other expenses in view of the fact many drivers have lost almost all of their business. [7714/20]

821. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the supports available for a sector (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7840/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 756, 788, 811 and 821 together.

I understand the very difficult business environment that small public service vehicle (SPSV) 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 also note that self-employed owner-operators of SPSVs may avail of the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment of €350 a week.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has also taken a number of actions 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. It has engaged with the insurance industry to facilitate a suspension of SPSV insurance for those operators who decide to temporarily stop working and suspend their licences. Arrangements are in place to facilitate the swift re-activation of the suspended licence when such an SPSV operator wishes to return to work.

National Car Test

757. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if a matter raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) will receive a response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7322/20]

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 a further announcement on this matter shortly.

Questions - Written Answers
Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles

758. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if new measures to ensure that there are enough wheelchair-accessible taxis available for wheelchair users, particularly in the Dublin area, will be implemented; if a way can be found to ensure that taxi drivers who have obtained grants to adapt their taxis to wheelchair use actually give priority to wheelchair users; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7323/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Deputy may wish to be aware that between February 2019 and February 2020 the number of licensed wheelchair-accessible small public service vehicles (SPSVs) increased from 2,253 to 3,100, an increase of 37.5%. In light of this increase in wheelchair-accessible SPSVs, I see no reason to introduce new legislative measures at this time.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) is the statutory regulator for the SPSV sector and it also administers the wheelchair accessible vehicle (WAV) grant scheme for the SPSV sector. Accordingly, I have referred your question to the NTA for direct reply to you in regard to the other matters raised in your question. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within 10 working days.

Aviation Industry

759. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to restructure the regulatory functions of the Irish Aviation Authority and the Commission for Aviation Regulation; his plans to merge the safety regulation division of the Irish Aviation Authority with the Commission for Aviation for Regulation to bring about a stand-alone aviation regulator under the name of the Irish Aviation Authority; if the existing air traffic control side of the Irish Aviation Authority will be reconstituted as a separate State-owned commercial company; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7324/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I am glad to report to the Deputy that an advanced draft of a Bill to give effect to this key reform measure is being scrutinised by my Department, in consultation with the Office of the Attorney General. It should be ready for publication soon. As reflected in the Government's policy statement on the matter - which was published in September 2017 - the Bill provides for the establishment of a newly reconstituted regulatory Irish Aviation Authority - merging the safety and security regulatory functions of the current IAA with the economic regulation and consumer affairs functions of the Commission for Aviation Regulation. This will create a single aviation regulator, and it will represent an important modernisation and strengthening of aviation regulation in Ireland. The draft Bill also provides for the establishment of a completely separate, commercial State-owned air navigation service provider. This new company will operate as a regulated commercial entity, and for so long as it continues to make a profit - noting that it is a State monopoly - it will continue to pay the State annual dividends.

Being very much an outlier internationally, the institutional separation of Ireland's aviation regulatory and commercial air navigation service provision functions is important. It is an old model, which was put in place in the early 1990s and has remained largely unchanged since. The industry and what constitutes effective regulation has moved on. The reforms I have set in motion are in line with international best practice, and they will enhance the State's aviation sector through the establishment of a stronger and more robust regulatory environment. While progress has been made on the legislative front, I have been less happy with the pace of prepa-

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ration in the IAA to prepare for the changes, and I have made that clear to the Board and the management.

These benefits of the reform, and the broad stakeholder support for it, were recently underlined in a report on the safety performance of the IAA, which I commissioned under Section 32 of the IAA Act 1993. This report noted, as I have raised myself, that the progress on the reform project has not been achieved as quickly as expected.

When the time comes to publish the Bill and seek Oireachtas endorsement, I am confident that this is one of those legislative proposals that will lend itself to broad political support.

Covid-19 Pandemic

760. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the guidelines for driving instructors with regard to returning to work; when they will be able to return to work; the precautions they will need to take; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7345/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Driving lessons are provided by self-employed private individuals or companies, and they have a responsibility to ensure that they can comply with the necessary public health requirements before they can reopen their businesses. It is not within the remit of my Department to issue advice to driving instructors on public health issues.

However, I expect them to encounter difficulties similar to those which will face the RSA in relation to the resumption of the driving test, in terms of complying with the National Return to Work Safely Protocol.

For the Deputy's information, 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.

National Car Test

761. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when it is proposed to recommence the national car test programme. [7364/20]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

Questions - Written Answers

762. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when high-performance athletes (details supplied) will be permitted to return to training. [7365/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Subject to appropriate, tightly defined limitations and conditionality, I have been advocating such a return to training, following current practices for high performance athletes elsewhere in Europe.

This issue is under consideration and the subject of discussion with my colleague, the Minister for Health.

Covid-19 Pandemic

763. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on granting permission to high-performance athletes (details supplied) to return to training. [7366/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Subject to appropriate, tightly defined limitations and conditionality, I have been advocating such a return to training, following current practices for high performance athletes elsewhere in Europe.

This issue is under consideration and the subject of discussion with my colleague, the Minister for Health.

Driver Licences

764. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to facilitate online driver licence issuance for first-time licence applicants by which a first-time driver licence applicant fulfils all requirements, for example, has passed a theory and or practical driving test. [7367/20]

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.

Likewise, I have extended the validity of certificates of competency - issued when a person passes a driving test - and of certificates issued on passing a driver theory test.

The operation of the National Driver Licensing Service is a matter for the Road Safety Authority. Applications for driving licence renewal are available online in certain circumstances, and the Authority is working to extend this option for others, including applicants for a first driving licence.

Driver Test

765. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the guidelines in relation to learner drivers, particularly those who have completed twelve driving lessons and have had their tests cancelled; if such drivers will be allowed to drive unaccompanied for a period of time; the number of persons awaiting driver tests; the timeframe to clear the

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back log; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7374/20]

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.

Studies have repeatedly shown that unaccompanied learner drivers are markedly more likely to be involved in fatal collisions. For that reason, there can be no exceptions to the current laws in force around learner drivers. Regrettably, there has been an increase in fatalities on our roads so far in 2020, and we must not relax the standards required of our drivers before being awarded a driving licence, even in the case of frontline workers.

An unaccompanied learner driver who is stopped by an Garda Síochána may face penalty points, a fixed charge, seizure of the vehicle and possible prosecution.

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. Our first priority must continue to be protecting the lives and health of our citizens as well as the capacity of the emergency and health services, whether from infection or from death and injury on the roads.

Driver Test

766. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on the way in which driver testing capacity can be resumed here; the way in which he will address the inevitable backlog in driver tests and sensitive cases for expedited tests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7384/20]

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 for which it is responsible, following the publication of the Government roadmap and, more recently, the National Return to Work Safety Protocol agreed by employer and trade union representatives. 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.

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.

Consumer Rights

767. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if persons who have flight reservations for flights which are not cancelled but which depart from an airport which is outside of the permissible travel area around their homes, for example, 5 kilometres or 20 kilometres from 8 June 2020 are entitled to a full refund or free cancellation or booking change; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7397/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Deputy raises an important issue, and it is one affecting many people. As things stand in law, air passenger rights are protected by Regulation (EC) No. 261/2004, which covers the rights of passenger in instances of cancellations and other scenarios, including long delays. However, if a flight goes ahead and a customer either cancels or does not use their ticket, they are not entitled to a refund under EU law.

My understanding is that the current practice of the two main Irish airlines serving the Irish market, having regard to the Covid-19 travel restrictions, is to offer their customers the opportunity to rebook a flight for later in the year or to receive a voucher. There is, however, no legal obligation on them to provide a full refund, irrespective of the Government advices.

Consumers who wish to clarify their entitlements in respect of airlines should consult the Commission for Aviation Regulation's consumer affairs website www.flightrights.ie. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission has also made available some further consumer advices on flights and package holidays, which is available on its website at <https://www.cpc.ie/consumers/covid-19/consumer-travel/>.

National Car Test

768. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the steps

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he will take to reopen NCT centres to test vehicles for car dealerships as soon as possible; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7410/20]

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 services 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 a statement in the coming weeks on this matter.

Public Private Partnerships

769. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the roads and linked companies that have a traffic guarantee associated with them; the amount of compensation paid under each agreement annually since 2014; the estimated compensation to be paid in 2020 under each agreement in the context of lower traffic volumes due to Covid-19; and the mechanisms by which the State can claim not to be liable for the compensation under traffic guarantees in view of the unusual nature and cause of the lower traffic volumes. [7415/20]

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.

National Car Test

770. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans for NCT retests once centres reopen (details supplied). [7422/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): While the provisions governing the operation of the National Car Test, including the charging of fees, are set out in the relevant regulations, 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.

Questions - Written Answers

In that capacity, I understand that the RSA is considering suitable administrative actions to take account of the exceptional circumstances where vehicle owners have not been able to avail of a retest as a direct result of the emergency measures. Accordingly, I have forwarded your query to the RSA as it relates to an operational matter.

Cycling Facilities Funding

771. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if funding will be allocated for the expansion of public bikes for Cork. [7429/20]

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 cycle and public transport infrastructure. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport, including the management of public bike schemes.

Decisions regarding contracts, operation and expansion of existing and proposed bike schemes fall under the remit of 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.

Driver Test

772. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to extend the permit period of approved driving instructors in line with the extension of driver licences (details supplied). [7431/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The period of a validity of a range of certificates and licences was extended because the relevant services and offices were subject to closure in compliance with the requirements of public health. As the Road Safety Authority is processing Approved Driving Instructors' Licences as normal, it was not necessary and there are no proposals to extend the period of validity of these licences at this time.

Driver Licences

773. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if the risks associated with the issuing of driver licences without applicants sitting the driver test have been evaluated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7448/20]

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.

I would like to point out that the current pass rate for driving tests nationally stands at 52% for 2019, so having fulfilled all of the driving lesson requirements does not mean that an indi-

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vidual meets the standard required to pass the test.

In terms of risk assessment, studies have repeatedly shown that unaccompanied learner drivers are markedly more likely to be involved in fatal collisions. For that reason, there can be no exceptions to the current laws in force around learner drivers. Regrettably, there has been an increase in fatalities on our roads so far in 2020, and we must not relax the standards required of our drivers before being awarded a driving licence, even in the case of frontline workers. Not only is there the risk to both driver and other road users of unqualified drivers causing deaths or injuries, there is also the pressure such incidents would put on the emergency and health services at a time of national emergency.

An unaccompanied learner driver who is stopped by an Garda Síochána may face penalty points, a fixed charge, seizure of the vehicle and possible prosecution.

Driver Test

774. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when driver testing will recommence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7457/20]

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 you 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 NPHT and national experts.

Vehicle Registration Data

Questions - Written Answers

775. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the total number of vehicles here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7462/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The total number of vehicles on the National Vehicle and Driver File licensed as at 30th April 2020 is 2,766,193.

The table below provides details on the number of such vehicles broken down by their taxation class.

Taxation Class	30th April 2020
Private Cars	2,146,421
Goods Vehicles	357,771
Agricultural Tractors	76,083
Motorcycles	42,549
Small Public Service Vehicles	20,838
Exempt Vehicles	31,589
Vintage Vehicles	50,329
Motor Caravans	12,595
Large Public Service Vehicles	10,597
Mobile Machines	4,838
Excavators, Trench Diggers etc.	5,602
Small Dumpers & Forklift Truck	3,101
General Haulage Tractors	736
School buses	679
Hearses	964
Youth/Community Buses	805
Island Vehicles	669
Off Road Dumpers	27
TOTAL	2,766,193

Covid-19 Pandemic

776. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if advice will be provided to local sports clubs on reopening their facilities in view of the importance of these clubs in the community; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7469/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I have established an Expert Group on Return to Sport, which includes medical expertise, for the purposes of assisting the sporting community in Ireland, in particular the National Governing Bodies of sport (NGBs), to make a safe, phased return to sport in accordance with the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

The sporting bodies have sought from my Department and Sport Ireland guidance to assist them in their preparation of protocols for returning to train and returning to play. The Expert Group will provide general guidance to the NGBs on issues common to many sports such as dressing room and equipment hygiene, hand hygiene and other matters, informed by public health advice and international best practice. I can also confirm that, with the support of the Expert Group, my Department would, provided the Expert Group is satisfied, be able to indicate to the NGBs that their return to sport protocols appear compliant with the Roadmap and public health advice.

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To date, in excess of 40 separate protocols have been presented for consideration. The Expert Group will assess these on a phase-by-phase basis, re-evaluating protocols as and when the public health guidance changes.

The Expert Group held its first meeting last week and is to hold its second this week.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

777. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to provide grant aid to the many sports and community clubs that are struggling due to the lack of member interaction and potential fundraising; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7472/20]

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 sports and community clubs as well as their national sporting bodies, include: 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.

Rural Transport Services

778. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his attention has been drawn to a recent request by the National Transport Authority to review a number of rural transport services being provided by LocalLink in County Meath; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7494/20]

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. It is the National Transport Authority (NTA) which has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally. The NTA also has national responsibility for integrated local and rural transport, including management of the Rural Transport Programme (RTP) which now operates under the Local Link brand.

In light of the NTA's responsibilities in this matter, I have referred your question to the NTA

for direct reply to you. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Driver Licences

779. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to amend the situation in relation to persons (details supplied) with provisional licences during the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7498/20]

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 licenced driver. Until a learner can meet this standard and pass this test, they are not safe to take to our roads without appropriate supervision.

I would also like to point out that the current pass rate for driving tests nationally stands at 52% for 2019, so having fulfilled all of the driving lesson requirements does not mean that an individual meets the standard required to pass the test.

Studies have repeatedly shown that unaccompanied learner drivers are markedly more likely to be involved in fatal collisions. For that reason, there can be no exceptions to the current laws in force around learner drivers. Regrettably, there has been an increase in fatalities on our roads so far in 2020, and we must not relax the standards required of our drivers before being awarded a driving licence, even in the case of frontline workers.

An unaccompanied learner driver who is stopped by an Garda Síochána may face penalty points, a fixed charge, seizure of the vehicle and possible prosecution.

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 you 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 con-

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sultation 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.

Taxi Licences Renewals

780. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the way in which a taxi driver can renew their taxi licence during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7507/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The National Transport Authority (NTA) has extended the renewal dates of vehicle licences due to expire between 13 March 2020 and 12 June 2020 by three months. The NTA has also waived the late renewal fee for any licence holder who was unable to renew in time due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the licencing of taxis and other small public service vehicles is a matter for the NTA under the provisions of the Taxi Regulation Act 2013, 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.

Driver Test

781. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when a person (details supplied) who is on the emergency list for a driver test appointment can expect to receive same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7510/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The operation of the driver testing services is the responsibility of the Road Safety Authority (RSA), and I have no role in individual cases. Due to the closure of services provided by the 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.

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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.

Dublin Bus

782. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of complaints by cyclists that have been made to Dublin Bus in the past three years; and the actions that resulted from these complaints. [7511/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTAS) I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, the Department is not involved in the day-to-day management and operational aspects of public transport - the individual operators are responsible for that, and in this case Dublin Bus.

Accordingly, I have forwarded the Deputy's question to Dublin Bus for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Dublin Bus

783. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of two actions as confirmed in correspondence from the National Transport Authority on 3 July 2019 to a group (details supplied). [7512/20]

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 in Ireland.

The issues raised are matters for the National Transport Authority (NTA) in conjunction with Dublin Bus and 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.

Traffic Calming Measures

784. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will liaise with the Office of Public Works to arrange to survey traffic impacts of closing the Phoenix Park to through traffic in view of public demand; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7513/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The management of the Phoenix Park in Dublin, including the management of traffic and related matters such as traffic surveys, is a matter for the Office of Public Works, for which my colleague the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform is responsible to the Oireachtas.

Traffic management generally, including surveys, is a matter for the relevant local author-

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ity, under the Roads and Road Traffic Acts, which I believe is Dublin City Council in this case.

National Car Test

785. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when he plans to permit the reopening of NCT centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7521/20]

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.

Driver Licences

786. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if issues (details supplied) regarding driver licences for former USA residents now seeking to obtain full Irish licences will be investigated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7526/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The starting point for driver licensing policy is public safety - we issue driving licences when we are satisfied that the applicants have met a defined standard, by passing tests. Irish driver licensing law operates within a framework of EU law, which among other things sets the standards to be met in driving tests in all Member States. On this basis, EU driving licences are mutually exchangeable.

When it comes to licence exchange with non-EU countries, we may reach bilateral agreements. In order to qualify for this programme, we must first ensure that the driving licence and testing regime is of at least the same high quality as that in operation in this country. The United States is not one of the countries with which such an arrangement is currently in place. This reflects the wide variation in standards under licences are obtained in the US - which one of the reasons for the variation in road safety across the states, many of which have road safety records significantly worse than any EU Member State.

Where a person takes up residence in Ireland with a driving licence which is not from the EU and not from a jurisdiction with which we have a bilateral agreement, this leaves us with the position where the only alternative is to ask them to go through the process of obtaining an Irish licence.

This link provides information on how to obtain an Irish driving licence as the holder of a licence from another Country; [https://www.ndls.ie/images/Documents/Flyers/166425%20RSA%20Foreign%20Licence%20\(EDT\)_WEB.PDF](https://www.ndls.ie/images/Documents/Flyers/166425%20RSA%20Foreign%20Licence%20(EDT)_WEB.PDF)

At present, the only differences allowed where someone is the holder of a full but non-exchangeable licence is that they are not required to wait the normal 6 months before applying

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for the test and they undergo a reduced number of 6 Essential Driver Training (EDT) lessons.

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 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 NPHET and national experts.

National Car Test

787. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when the NCT centres will be reopening. [7537/20]

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.

Question No. 788 answered with Question No. 756.

Tourism Policy

789. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to help the tourism industry outside of major urban areas in which seasonality is a factor. [7539/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): The Minister, Mr. 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 including areas outside the main urban areas, for the period 2020-2023. The Taskforce may consult with stakeholders to inform its deliberations and report back later this year.

The development of the tourism industry is an operational matter for Fáilte Ireland. I have referred the Deputy's question to Fáilte Ireland for further information and for direct reply. Please contact my private office if you do not hear from them within ten working days.

Public Transport Initiatives

790. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status

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of MetroLink and BusConnects in the context of Covid-19 and related economic circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7555/20]

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. I can confirm to the Deputy that at a policy level the current status of both projects remains unchanged: both projects are long-term infrastructure investments designed to add capacity to our public transport network and both are at a relatively early stage of their project lifecycle.

The Deputy is aware that National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, including the MetroLink and BusConnects projects.

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

791. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the supports available to clubs (details supplied) in order to put in place adequate health and safety precautions at their grounds. [7577/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I have established an Expert Group on Return to Sport, which includes medical expertise, for the purposes of assisting the sporting community in Ireland, in particular the National Governing Bodies of sport (NGBs), to make a safe, phased return to sport in accordance with the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

The sporting bodies have sought from my Department and Sport Ireland guidance to assist them in their preparation of protocols for returning to train and returning to play. The Expert Group will provide general guidance to the NGBs on issues common to many sports such as dressing room and equipment hygiene, hand hygiene and other matters, informed by public health advice and international best practice. I can also confirm that, with the support of the Expert Group, my Department would, provided the Expert Group is satisfied, be able to indicate to the NGBs that their return to sport protocols appear compliant with the Roadmap and public health advice.

To date, in excess of 40 separate protocols have been presented for consideration. The Expert Group will assess these on a phase-by-phase basis, re-evaluating protocols as and when the public health guidance changes. The Expert Group held its first meeting last week and is to hold its second this week.

Covid-19 Pandemic

792. **Deputy Jack Chambers** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the position regarding airline passengers that were unable to take flights due to Covid-19; if he will address the concerns of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7578/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The law is clear in cir-

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cumstances 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, but I understand that in such cases airlines are generally offering customers the chance to rebook or take a voucher in light of the covid-19 travel restrictions.

Anyone having difficulties securing a refund for a cancelled flight should contact the Commission for Aviation Regulation. Further advice is available on its dedicated passenger rights website www.fliightrights.ie. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission is best placed to offer advice on consumer rights generally related to travel at www.cpc.ie.

Covid-19 Pandemic

793. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if specific guidelines have been circulated to each sporting organisation on the communication of public health information to their members and players with regard to clubs reopening and continued restrictions on members from outside a 5km radius and cocooning members. [7589/20]

794. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if guidance has been issued to sporting clubs and organisations on the way in which to implement public health guidelines within such clubs and organisations. [7590/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 793 and 794 together.

I have established an Expert Group on Return to Sport, which includes medical expertise, for the purposes of assisting the sporting community in Ireland, in particular the National Governing Bodies of sport (NGBs), to make a safe, phased return to sport in accordance with the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

The sporting bodies have sought from my Department and Sport Ireland guidance to assist them in their preparation of protocols for returning to train and returning to play. The Expert Group will provide general guidance to the NGBs on issues common to many sports such as dressing room and equipment hygiene, hand hygiene and other matters, informed by public health advice and international best practice. I can also confirm that, with the support of the Expert Group, my Department would, provided the Expert Group is satisfied, be able to indicate to the NGBs that their return to sport protocols appear compliant with the Roadmap and public health advice.

To date, in excess of 40 separate protocols have been presented for consideration. The Expert Group will assess these on a phase-by-phase basis, re-evaluating protocols as and when the public health guidance changes.

The Expert Group held its first meeting last week and is to hold its second this week.

Covid-19 Pandemic

795. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if issues raised in correspondence (details supplied) will be given consideration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7591/20]

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Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business is based on public health advice and compliance with the requirements of each of its five phases by all concerned is essential to ensure continued progress against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Phase one of the Roadmap clearly provides that while it is possible to participate in a range of sporting activities in groups of no more than four people, this must be within 5km of the households of those involved. The guidance also states explicitly that social distancing should be maintained at all times. It is also important to highlight that the public health advice for those who are cocooning is to continue to stay at home, except for brief outdoor exercise within 5km of their home.

It has been brought to my attention that, while the overwhelming majority of people are fully respecting the public health guidelines, there have been some difficulties in relation to adherence to the 5km travel restriction by people engaging in sporting activity during Phase One. This situation is both regrettable and concerning. Sport Ireland has been in communication with the sporting organisations concerned to voice this concern and to reinforce the importance of the memberships of all sporting organisations respecting the Roadmap and complying with public health regulations at all times.

Driver Test Centres

796. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when RSA offices will reopen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7595/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Commercial vehicle roadworthiness testing resumed on Monday 18 May 2020. The RSA is currently working, in consultation with my Department, on plans for the resumption of the wider 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.

Dates for the resumption of 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 NPHT and national experts.

Greenways Funding

797. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to provide greenway funding to the proposed Sligo-Leitrim northern counties greenway (details supplied); his views on the importance of the greenway to the rural areas along the route; if the possibility of funding a small proportion of the greenway will be investigated to establish the route for future development; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7604/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I had the great pleasure of opening a demonstration section of the Sligo Leitrim and Northern Counties Railway

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(SLNCR) Greenway last year with First Minister Arlene Foster. As I stated then, it has great potential to contribute to economic regeneration along its route from Collooney in Sligo to Manorhamilton in Leitrim and to Blacklion on the Cavan -Fermanagh border before crossing into Fermanagh and ending in Enniskillen.

The last round of construction funding for Greenways required projects to have planning permission and ready access to the land required for the Greenway in place for us to provide funding. Unfortunately the SLNCR did not have that in place so was not in a position to be awarded funding for construction at that time.

Late last year, I announced a funding call under the Carbon Tax Fund for support for planning and design for Greenways and Leitrim County Council submitted an application for support under that call. I anticipate that funding under this initiative will be announced shortly.

The inclusion of a specific reference to the SLNCR Greenway in the “New Decade, New Approach” document that led to the re-opening of Stormont gives a strong indication of the level of support that the Greenway has in Government, both North and South.

Consumer Rights

798. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if passengers who hold bookings for flights to destinations abroad that have not been cancelled and are scheduled to depart during the summer are entitled to change their booking; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7611/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Air passenger rights are protected by Regulation (EC) No. 261/2004, which covers the rights of passenger in instances of denied boarding, long delays and cancellations. If a flight goes ahead and a customer cancels or simply does not use their ticket, they are not entitled to a refund under EU law.

It is my understanding that airlines are offering re-booking and other options to passengers and passenger should contact their airline directly to discuss options. Airlines may decide to waive change fees for flights to areas affected by travel restrictions, but this is a commercial decision to do so as is the decision to operate flights in the first instance.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

799. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has considered specific supports for scheduled services in the tourism sector such as grants to adapt vehicles. [7613/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Brendan Griffin): Following clarification with the Deputy’s Office, I understand this questions relates to supports for all tourism businesses.

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.

Government will continue to explore funding potential for all enterprises including tourism businesses as they work through the challenges facing them, including through any mechanisms allowable through the EU's state aid framework.

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 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

800. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has considered launching a public transport recovery taskforce in order to identify challenges and solutions for the public transport system here with regard to Covid-19 restrictions. [7614/20]

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. Ensuring the provision of integrated public transport services (bus, rail, light-rail and taxi) by public and private operators throughout the State is the statutory responsibility of the National Transport Authority.

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.

Over the course of the COVID-19 crisis, my Department has been working closely with the National Transport Authority (NTA) to ensure public transport services continue and to plan for the provision of enhanced public transport services in line with the Government Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. In this context, the NTA is engaging directly with both PSO

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and commercial transport operators and will publish their proposals shortly. My Department is also engaging directly with PSO and commercial operators to help inform policy decisions in relation to the public transport sector as we progress through the various phases of the Roadmap. My Department is also engaged intensively across Government in relation to progressing relevant issues. In view of these necessary approaches and engagements to address what is already a complex and difficult set of issues, I have no plans, at this time, to establish an additional administrative structure.

Military Aircraft

801. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of US troops and the quantity of weapons and munitions that have passed through Shannon Airport in each month to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7618/20]

837. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of US troops and the quantities of weapons and munitions that have passed through Shannon Airport in each month to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8043/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 801 and 837 together.

The carriage of munitions of war on board civil aircraft in Irish sovereign territory and on Irish registered civil aircraft, wherever they may be, is governed by the Air Navigation (Carriage of Munitions of War, Weapons and Dangerous Goods) Orders, 1973 and 1989.

My Department publishes statistics online regarding the number of such applications made and further details the numbers that are granted, refused and cancelled. These statistics are available at the following link:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/15da60-the-carriage-of-munitions-of-war-on-civil-aircraft/>

My Department has no function with regard to the transit of foreign military personnel through Irish sovereign territory or Irish airports.

Shannon Airport Authority has informed my Department that they collate such information at the end of each month, and that the number of US military personnel that transited through Shannon Airport from January 2020 to the end of April 2020 were:

Months in 2020	Number of US military personnel that transited Shannon Airport
January	6,617
February	6,069
March	9,290
April	4,149

Driver Safety

802. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if essential and front-line workers that are learner drivers will be allowed to drive on their own without a qualified driver (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[7637/20]

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.

I would also like to point out that the current pass rate for driving tests nationally stands at 52% for 2019, so having fulfilled all of the driving lesson requirements does not mean that an individual meets the standard required to pass the test.

Studies have repeatedly shown that unaccompanied learner drivers are markedly more likely to be involved in fatal collisions. For that reason, there can be no exceptions to the current laws in force around learner drivers. Regrettably, there has been an increase in fatalities on our roads so far in 2020, and we must not relax the standards required of our drivers before being awarded a driving licence, still less in the case of frontline workers, the protection of whose lives and health is critical for them, their families and indeed all of us. I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks for their work on all our behalf. I am not prepared, therefore, to put their safety at risk on our roads by taking steps which would do so for the sake of short-term expediency.

I would note that an unaccompanied learner driver who is stopped by an Garda Síochána may face penalty points, a fixed charge, seizure of the vehicle and possible prosecution.

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 you 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. Their views on the possible need and scope to prioritise essential workers will also be considered.

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.

The RSA has always reserved a number of driving test appointments for those who need one urgently, and this arrangement will continue following the reopening of the driving test service.

Driver Test Waiting Lists

803. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of persons on waiting lists for driver tests in counties Cavan, Monaghan and Meath and nationwide to date; the length of time they have been waiting in tabular form; the stage they are at in the application process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7661/20]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

804. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the phase driving lessons fall under in the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. [7662/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As a private company, a driving school must ensure that they can comply with the necessary public health requirements before they can reopen their businesses. The National Return to Work Safely Protocol was developed by NPHE in consultation with national experts to assist in this regard..

However, I expect a driving school to encounter the same difficulties as the RSA in terms of complying with the requirements of this Protocol. To put this in perspective, 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.

I understand that any company which reopens is subject to inspection by Health and Safety Authority, and may face serious sanctions, including closure, if found to be not in compliance with Protocol requirements.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

805. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to assist GAA clubs financially due to the loss of income caused by Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7668/20]

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 such as the GAA and their clubs include: 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.

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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 and the GAA has participated in every meeting of the group thus far. 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 such as the GAA. 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 Test

806. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the measures he plans to implement to clear the backlog of driver test applications when Covid-19 restrictions are fully lifted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7680/20]

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 you 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, the RSA will be guided by NPHEA and national experts.

Driver Test

807. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to advance driver tests for trained drivers who have completed their driving instruction criteria for testing; his views on matters raised by a person (details supplied) in correspondence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7684/20]

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.

I would also like to point out that the current pass rate for driving tests nationally stands at 52% for 2019, so having fulfilled all of the driving lesson requirements does not mean that an individual meets the standard required to pass the test.

Studies have repeatedly shown that unaccompanied learner drivers are markedly more likely to be involved in fatal collisions. For that reason, there can be no exceptions to the current laws in force around learner drivers. Regrettably, there has been an increase in fatalities on our roads so far in 2020, and we must not relax the standards required of our drivers before being awarded a driving licence, even in the case of frontline workers.

An unaccompanied learner driver who is stopped by an Garda Síochána may face penalty points, a fixed charge, seizure of the vehicle and possible prosecution.

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 you 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

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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 NPHET and national experts.

Tourism Industry

808. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the membership of the tourism task force; the remit of the taskforce; the frequency with which it has met; the frequency with which it plans to meet; if it plans to make recommendations; and if so, when it plans to make such recommendations. [7686/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Minister Griffin 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 is expected to report back later this year.

The Taskforce is due hold its first meeting this week. How the Taskforce administers its business will be a matter for the Chair. The membership of the Taskforce is available on my Department's website.

National Car Test

809. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when NCT and CVRT testing will resume; if the NCT or CVRT certificate will be backdated to the date they were due to be tested; if not, if certificates will be issued with the date on which they were actually tested; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7687/20]

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.

A 3-month and 4-month extension has been given to CVRT and NCT roadworthiness certificates respectively. Once these vehicles are presented for testing and pass a roadworthiness inspection, they will receive a new roadworthiness certificate which are generally valid for a period of 1 or 2 years depending on the age and type of vehicle.

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 coming weeks for those vehicles with a test due date on or after 28 March 2020.

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. Based on the work carried out to date, it is likely that a phased resumption will take place in line with the phases detailed in the roadmap.

Driver Licences

810. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of expiring learner permits which may lapse while driver tests are unable to be taken due to Covid-19 public health measures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7709/20]

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.

Whether the period will need to be extended further will be kept under review in light of anticipated timelines by the RSA to resume driver testing and the National Driver Licensing Services.

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.

Question No. 811 answered with Question No. 756.

Driver Test

812. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when he plans to resume driver tests particularly for those persons that urgently require a test in order take-up employment and require a full licence or a bus or truck licence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7720/20]

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 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.

As you 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.

However, it may be possible in the current circumstances to carry out driving tests safely in trucks, buses or ambulances, and the RSA examines if it can be done on a case-by-case basis when requested.

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 con-

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sultation with the relevant health authorities.

The RSA has always reserved a number of driving test appointments for those who need a full driving licence urgently, and will continue to do so when the driver testing service is back up and running.

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 NPHT and national experts.

Driver Test Centres

813. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if there are parking facilities provided at the RSA testing centre at Carnmore, Oranmore, County Galway; if so, the number of vehicle parking places dedicated; if not, if parking facilities will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7721/20]

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.

Shannon Airport Facilities

814. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the steps he will take to ensure that Shannon Airport is not downgraded and that when regular scheduled flights resume, a company (details supplied) continues to operate services from the airport to ensure that a service is provided on the western seaboard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7722/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I would like to thank the Deputy for his question in relation to Shannon Airport.

As we are all aware 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. Like other Irish Airports, Shannon Airport has been severely impacted by Covid-19.

The Deputy will be aware that 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 full suite of Covid-19 Government funding and supports have been notified to Shannon Group for consideration.

In relation to Aer Lingus or indeed any other airline operating services from Shannon, the position is that there are currently no flight restrictions in place in Ireland and the operation of any route from Shannon, is a commercial decision for airlines, in consultation with the airport and other stakeholders. Aer Lingus has advised my Department that it will keep its schedule under review having regard to the changing circumstances.

Questions - Written Answers
Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

815. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will establish a resilience fund and associated task force to aid in protection and development of sports organisations that were financially impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. [7753/20]

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 include: 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. 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. An Expert Group on Return to Sport has also been established, 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.

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. It is considered that these arrangements and plans will serve to protect and develop Irish sport for the future.

Covid-19 Pandemic

816. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when coaches can recommence soccer training for under-16s while adhering to social distancing measures. [7767/20]

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.

Phase two of the Roadmap, which is scheduled to commence on 8 June subject to prevailing public health advice, permits people to engage in outdoor sporting and fitness activities, involving small group team sports training (but not matches) where social distancing can be maintained and where there is no contact.

With a view to ensuring effective compliance with the requirements of phase two, a number of issues remain to be considered and clarified such as the applicable definition for small group team training. I have established an Expert Group on Return to Sport, which will provide guidance on this and other issues to the sporting bodies on a phase by phase basis so that they

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can prepare for the phased return to sporting activity in line with the Government Roadmap. In this context it is necessary to emphasise the need for each sporting body to prepare a detailed protocol setting out the manner in which it proposes to achieve compliance with the restrictions applicable to each phase.

Motor Tax

817. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if vans used for domestic purposes can be evaluated for motor tax based on CO2 emissions for private cars rather than the current cc-based valuation for commercial vehicles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7770/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I refer the Deputy to the response to Question No. 995 of 20 May 2020. The position remains the same.

Rail Services Data

818. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the orders made for rolling stock, carriages and engines for Irish Rail; if no orders have been placed, the reason therefor; if orders have been placed, the number of each ordered; when the orders were confirmed; the delivery date; the individual and total costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7784/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding of public transport. The procurement of rail rolling stock is a matter for Iarnród Éireann in the first instance which, in consultation with the National Transport Authority (NTA), continues to examine how best to source additional rolling stock as efficiently and effectively as possible while ensuring value for money for the taxpayer.

As the Deputy may be aware, I announced last year the Government's approval for the NTA and Iarnród Éireann to proceed with the proposed purchase of 41 additional InterCity Railcars to increase capacity across the Greater Dublin Area rail network. This additional stock will cost approximately €150 million with delivery originally scheduled to commence from Q4 2021 onwards.

Noting the statutory responsibility of the agencies, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply and further details on the issues raised. Please advise my office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Bus Services

819. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if additional buses will be allocated to particularly busy routes in Dublin city as restrictions are eased but social distancing must remain in place. [7791/20]

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.

Questions - Written Answers

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.

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

820. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of the Covid-19 mobility framework; and the reason the process was started two months into the pandemic and not at the outset. [7813/20]

824. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to extend the Covid-19 mobility frameworks nationwide; if not, if the matter will be reconsidered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7870/20]

846. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on providing additional funding and clear guidance to local authorities on the establishment of walking and cycling infrastructure to ensure safety and social distancing are a priority in towns and cities. [8211/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 820, 824 and 846 together.

I welcome the fact the National Transport Authority (NTA) is engaging with local authorities to support them in the development of COVID Mobility plans and importantly to also support the local authorities in their delivery of required infrastructure improvements. As we move through the phases of Government's "Roadmap to Reopening Society and Business", improvements introduced under these plans will play an important role in providing additional transport capacity and also facilitating social distancing in urban areas.

I can confirm that the NTA has written to all 31 local authorities to offer its financial and technical support and this support will be funded through my Department's sustainable mobility investment programme. The NTA envisages a range of measures may be required in our cities and towns, such as

- Widening of footpaths to facilitate queuing outside shops and enable social distancing;
- Potential pedestrianisation of some streets where necessary and feasible to accommodate social distancing, particularly where this supports business activities;
- Potential one-way systems to create space for footpath widening;
- Altering traffic signal times to reduce pedestrian waiting/crowding plus the automatic activation of some pedestrian phases in order to aid pedestrian movement and to minimise contact with signal push buttons;
- Providing additional temporary facilities for cyclists; and
- Provision of some external space where appropriate to support business activities.

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Deputies will be aware that some local authorities have already put in place improvements to facilitate increased active travel and I expect these improvements will continue in the coming weeks and months.

Question No. 821 answered with Question No. 756.

Consumer Rights

822. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the steps he will take to support full refunds to customers who have had their travel cancelled due to Covid-19 restrictions; the position regarding regulation EU261/2004 which establishes the right to refunds if flights are cancelled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7853/20]

835. **Deputy Darren O’Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the measures he is taking to ensure travellers are entitled to cash refunds for cancelled flights. [8028/20]

844. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if existing legislation will be enforced to ensure those whose flights have been cancelled can be repaid in full in the same manner in which they originally purchased them. [8155/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 822, 835 and 844 together.

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.flightright.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.

Ports Policy

823. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if all major Irish fishing ports will be included on the ports of registry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7865/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Ship registration is

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governed by the Mercantile Marine Act 1955, as amended. Section 32(2) of that Act provides that the Minister may by order, after consultation with the Revenue Commissioners, amend the list of ports of registry mentioned in the Second Schedule to the Act. The Revenue Commissioners hold the statutory ship registration role and appoint the registrars of ships. Currently there are 13 ports of registry designated as such in accordance with the 1955 Act. Any proposal for additional ports of registry would require consideration in consultation with the Revenue Commissioners, including having regard to the merits of each location and the ongoing resource and administration implications that would arise.

The Merchant Shipping (Registration of Ships) Act 2014, although not yet commenced, provides a basis for the introduction of an updated and modernised ship registration system in Ireland, replacing the 1955 Act. The 2014 Act provides an enabling framework for the introduction of a new centralised, electronic Irish Register of Ships. Section 30 of the Act will facilitate changes to the list of ports of registry having regard to a number of considerations, including the demand for a port to be a port of registry, the importance of the location and the level of maritime activity at the port. When the new central Irish Register of Ships is in place and the 2014 Act is commenced, I will be open to considering the case for a particular port to be made a port of registry that is made on the basis of the framework set out in the Act.

Pending the commencement of the 2014 Act, I have no plans to review the list of ports of registry.

Question No. 824 answered with Question No. 820.

Driver Test

825. Deputy Paul Murphy asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if emergency driver test appointments will be provided for persons whose planned tests were cancelled due to Covid-19, who are categorised as essential workers and who urgently need to do a test in order to be able to drive legally to get to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7896/20]

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 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.

The RSA has always reserved a number of appointments for those needing a driving test urgently, and will continue to do so following the resumption of the testing service.

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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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

826. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his attention has been drawn to a sporting event (details supplied); if the event has been reviewed by his Department; if so, if the event will proceed in view of public health guidance and social distancing concerns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7941/20]

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 1st 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 will also be 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.

Road Safety

827. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the legislation which governs the use of quads and scramblers on public roads; the circumstances in which they are permitted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7964/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Scrambler motorbikes, quadbikes and other small similar vehicles, are mechanically propelled vehicles, which means that they are vehicles intended or adapted for propulsion by mechanical power. They are subject to the same road traffic legislation as every other vehicle on our roads. As such, irrespective of engine capacity, under Road Traffic legislation, the user of a scrambler motorbike, a quad bike or similar vehicle, in a public place, must have insurance, road tax and a driving licence, and must also wear a helmet, with severe penalties under the road traffic laws (including fixed charge notices, penalty points, fines and possible seizure of the vehicle) for not being in compliance with these requirements.

For the purposes of the Road Traffic Acts, a "public place" means any public road, and any

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street, road or other place to which the public have access with vehicles whether as of right or by permission and whether subject to or free of charge.

Scrambler motorbikes and quad bikes must also comply with the requirements of the Road Traffic (Construction, Equipment and Use of Vehicles) Regulations 1963 to 2002 and the Road Traffic (Lighting of Vehicles) Regulations 1963 to 1996 when used in a public place. These regulations prescribe standards in relation to essential matters such as brakes, steering, mirrors, safety glass, wipers, headlamps, rear lighting, indicators and reflectors.

Enforcement of the road traffic laws is a matter for An Garda Síochána, and I am advised that it is satisfied that it has the necessary powers to deal with cases concerning the use of scrambler motorbikes and similar vehicles in public places under the Road Traffic Acts.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

828. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if taxi drivers can avail of an insurance break or holiday or a rebate for the Covid-19 period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7966/20]

852. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to not require taxi drivers who cancel their PSV car insurance during the Covid-19 crisis to have to put their cars through suitability and NCT tests or have to send back their plates to the NTA while their insurance is suspended in order that they can quickly return to work when the industry recovers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8277/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 828 and 852 together.

I understand the very difficult business environment that small public service vehicle (SPSV) 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 also note that self-employed owner-operators of SPSVs may avail of the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment of €350 a week.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has also 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. It has engaged with the insurance industry to facilitate a suspension of SPSV insurance for those 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.

To avail of this insurance reduction, SPSV operators must temporarily suspend their SPSV licences. 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.

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

829. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if taxi drivers can avail of a break or holiday or rebate on motor tax costs for the Covid-19 period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7967/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The legislation which sets out the circumstances for refunds of motor tax provides for a refund of motor tax only in certain limited circumstances, 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.

There are no plans currently to amend the legislation to extend the grounds for the granting of a refund.

It should also be noted that no refund is payable where the annual rate of motor tax is €119 or less i.e., a concessionary rate of motor tax. The current rate of tax applicable to taxis and hackneys is €95 per annum.

The Deputy should note, however, that there is a facility in place to declare a vehicle off the road if a vehicle is not going to be 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 using the following form:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4df54e-declaration-of-non-use-of-a-vehicle/>.

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

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830. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if specific financial supports are available for taxi drivers to adapt their vehicles to meet Covid-19 public health advice; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7968/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I understand the very difficult business environment that small public service vehicle (SPSV) 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.

The National Transport Authority (NTA), as the statutory regulator for the SPSV sector, has published information and guidance for the SPSV industry about reducing the spread of COVID-19.

The NTA has also taken a number of actions 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. It has engaged with the insurance industry to facilitate a suspension of SPSV insurance for those operators who decide to temporarily stop working and suspend their licences. Arrangements are in place to facilitate the swift re-activation of the suspended licence when such an SPSV operator wishes to return to work.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

831. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if a taxi driver will need an engineer's report to verify works if they adapt their vehicle to meet Covid-19 public health advice; and if so, the person or body that will cover the cost for the report. [7969/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The regulation of the small public service vehicle (SPSV) industry, including vehicle standards for SPSVs, is a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA) under the provisions of the Taxi Regulation Act 2013.

Given the role of the NTA as regulator, I have referred your question to the Authority for direct reply to you. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within 10 working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic

832. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if it will be made mandatory for all passengers and staff to wear face coverings on public transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7972/20]

849. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views

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on the request by trade unions for passengers and commuters to wear face masks on bus, rail and air services during the Covid-19 pandemic in view of the ongoing challenges regarding restricted space on public transport. [8256/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I propose to take Questions Nos. 832 and 849 together.

On the 15th of May, An Taoiseach announced new 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. The public health guidance recommends that face coverings should be worn as an additional hygiene measure in these circumstances; it does not impose a mandatory requirement.

The public transport sector has continuously engaged with public health to ensure the safe operation of services throughout this health emergency, and will continue working 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 'Return to Work Safely Protocol'.

National Car Test

833. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when he expects national car test centres to reopen; if he envisages a phased reopening schedule to apply; if so, the vehicle types he expects to be included in the early phases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7973/20]

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 the 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. Based on the work carried out to date, it is likely that a phased resumption will take place in line with the phases detailed in the roadmap.

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 a further statement on this matter shortly.

Driver Test Waiting Lists

834. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the estimated backlog of driver tests in each county, in tabular form; his plans for addressing same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7975/20]

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.

Question No. 835 answered with Question No. 822.

Light Rail Projects

836. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will undertake a light rail feasibility study for Galway in view of climate action obligations and the changes necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8035/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Deputy is aware that the issue of light rail in Galway city was comprehensively examined as part of the development of the Galway Transport Strategy. The move toward evidence based, plan-led transport planning for our major cities is to be welcomed and allows for consideration of all relevant issues and the potential role all modes of transport can play in addressing those issues. The Deputy is aware that the Strategy concluded that a bus based public transport system, supported by various active travel and public realm improvements, represents the most appropriate system for Galway over the period considered by the Strategy.

In terms of the immediate impacts that may arise due to the impact of COVID-19, funding provided by my Department's sustainable mobility investment programme is supporting the National Transport Authority as it works with local authorities in developing, and delivering, COVID mobility plans.

Question No. 837 answered with Question No. 801.

Covid-19 Pandemic

838. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied) will receive a response in the context of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Businesses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8050/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business published on 3rd May sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions.

The public health measures for each phase are set out in the Roadmap which also includes details on when transport and travel measures come into effect.

These measures are dependent on advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and will only come into effect when the NPHE says that the conditions are right for more relaxation of the restrictions in place to protect us all.

A link to the Roadmap is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/news/58bc8b-taoiseach-announces-roadmap-for-reopening-society-and-business-and-u/>.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

839. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to cater for drivers who require a CPC to drive a lorry; and if it is possible to complete same online

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as can be done in the UK. [8096/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The Road Safety Authority (RSA) has made allowances for professional drivers with driver CPC cards that have expired, or that are due to expire, and who are prevented from completing training due to the current Covid 19 outbreak.

Drivers who hold a CPC card due to expire (or expired on or after the 26 March 2020) have been granted an extension of a maximum of six months up to the 26th September 2020. Drivers will be required to complete any outstanding periodic training in advance of the 26th of September 2020.

There is no provision in place for the RSA to allow CPC courses to take place online. Driver CPC is classroom based and legislation governing CPC training states training must take place in an RSA approved CPC training centre. In addition, the RSA would have concerns in relation to on-line training as it would be difficult to quality assure the training session and ensure that drivers complete the minimum 7 hours training.

However, my department and the RSA are currently working plans for the gradual resumption of the various statutory functions of the Authority, following on from last week's resumption of Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness Testing, and I expect to make further announcements in coming weeks.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

840. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if supports will be made available to private bus companies providing school transport but not being funded by Bus Éireann to ensure social distancing measures can be properly implemented; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8115/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The School Transport Scheme comes under the remit of my colleague the Minister for Education and Skills. Bus services outside that scheme are part of the overall public transport sector.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) is working with public transport operators (both public and private) who are implementing public health advice in relation to issues such as cleaning regimes and social distancing measures designed to limit the risk of spreading Covid-19. The public health advices apply across all public transport. The recently announced 'Return to Work Safely Protocol' also sets out the steps and processes employers and workers must take to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 in the workplace.

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 commercial bus operators are facing. 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.

Questions - Written Answers
Driver Licence Applications

841. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if it is possible for the purposes of applying for a learner permit with the NDLS to supply a PPS number or another form of identification in the place of a public services card number in view of the fact the appointment service for allocating the card has been temporarily suspended; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8116/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): Online applications for a learners permit can only be accepted with a Public Services card. As the Deputy will appreciate, a driving licence or learners permit is an important legal document, and before it can be issued, the identify of the applicant must be established beyond doubt. For that reason, an individual who does not have a PSC must present to the NDLS offices with a number of documents to prove his/her identity.

I would point out that a learner permit can only be applied for when the Driver Theory Test has been successfully passed, and as all NDLS public offices are currently closed, it is not possible to carry out the Driver Theory Test at this time.

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.

I appreciate that the inability to have access to the driving licence services at this time is among the many difficulties that we all are having to endure at this time, for those awaiting such tests.

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 NPHET and national experts.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

842. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if consideration is being given to providing special support to the small public service vehicle tourism sector due to the fact that the industry has come to a standstill for the 2020 tourism season and will only make a slow recovery in 2021; the measures in place to sustain this vital link in the tourism chain over the medium term; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8130/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I understand the very difficult business environment that small public service vehicle (SPSV) 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 also note that self-employed owner-operators of SPSVs may avail of the CO-

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VID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment of €350 a week.

I am aware that the SPSV sector 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.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has also taken a number of actions 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. It has engaged with the insurance industry to facilitate a suspension of SPSV insurance for those operators who decide to temporarily stop working and suspend their licences. The NTA has also put in place arrangements to facilitate the swift re-activation of the suspended licence when such an SPSV operator wishes to return to work.

Furthermore, it is my intention to meet with Advisory Committee on SPSVs next month.

Driver Test

843. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the measures he plans to put in place to assist the 27,500 learner drivers who, due to Covid-19, cannot complete their full driver tests; if new testing measures are being considered that do not require a tester sitting in the same car during the test; if laws can be relaxed during this time to ensure that learners who need to travel to work can still do so (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8145/20]

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.

I would also like to point out that the current pass rate for driving tests nationally stands at 52% for 2019, so having fulfilled all of the driving lesson requirements does not mean that an individual meets the standard required to pass the test.

Studies have repeatedly shown that unaccompanied learner drivers are markedly more likely to be involved in fatal collisions. For that reason, there can be no exceptions to the current laws in force around learner drivers. Regrettably, there has been an increase in fatalities on our roads so far in 2020, and we must not relax the standards required of our drivers before being awarded a driving licence, even in the case of frontline workers.

An unaccompanied learner driver who is stopped by an Garda Síochána may face penalty points, a fixed charge, seizure of the vehicle and possible prosecution.

Due to the closure of services provided by the Road Safety Authority (RSA) as a result of

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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. If it is the case that the NDLS centres have not re-opened before the extension period expires, the possibility of a further extension will be examined.

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 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.

I understand that the individual having completed 9 of the 12 Essential Driver Training lessons is concerned that their theory test is running out. A driver theory test is required before a person can apply for a learner permit, and a learner permit is required to take the lessons. The certificate issued on passing a theory test is valid for two years and should be used to apply for a learner permit within that time. In light of the Covid crisis, I have extended the validity of all theory test certificates which were due to expire from 1 March 2010 to 30 June 2020 inclusive by 4 months. If the person in question has a learner permit the validity of his theory test is no longer relevant. If he does not have a learner permit, he should not be driving.

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 NPHET and national experts.

Question No. 844 answered with Question No. 822.

Driver Test

845. Deputy Louise O'Reilly asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the steps being taken to help deal with those persons waiting to sit their driver tests; his plans to get testing back up and running using innovations to protect testers and those being tested; and his further plans to clear the backlog of those awaiting testing. [8175/20]

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 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.

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The resumption of driver testing 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 NPHET and national experts.

Question No. 846 answered with Question No. 820.

Maritime Safety

847. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will address a series of matters in respect of the safety of oil tankers (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8214/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): The statutory requirements for the safety and pollution prevention measures for ships, including oil tankers, are set out in the International Maritime Organization (IMO) Conventions which include the SOLAS and MARPOL Conventions. Primary responsibility for compliance with international convention requirements rests with the ship owner and the Flag State Administration of the ship concerned. There are currently no oil tankers flying the flag of Ireland.

Regulation 37 of Annex I to the MARPOL Convention requires that every oil tanker of 150 gross tonnage and above (and every ship other than an oil tanker of 400 gross tonnage or above), shall carry on board a shipboard oil pollution emergency plan, approved by the ship's Flag State Administration. An International Oil Pollution Prevention (IOPP) Certificate issued to a ship by the Flag State, or a Recognised Organisation acting on its behalf, certifies that the ship complies with the applicable requirements of Annex I of the Convention and the certificate must be carried onboard. A Record of Equipment is required to be attached to the IOPP Certificate which specifically deals with the compliance of the vessel with Regulation 37.

Matters in relation to the safety of oil terminals in the State are not within the remit of my Department and I understand that the Health and Safety Authority of the Department of Business Enterprise and Innovation has a role in relation to the safety of such installations.

The port state control authorities of my Department do not have a role in relation to quarantine measures on board vessels or with shore leave arrangements; such matters are within the remit of the Minister for Health and the Minister for Justice and Equality, respectively.

In relation to the application of the special measures to enhance maritime security as set out in Chapter XI-2 of the SOLAS convention, for ships this is also a matter regulated by the Flag

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State Administration. An International Ship Security (ISS) Certificate issued to a ship by the Flag State, or a Recognised Security Organisation acting on its behalf, certifies that the ship complies with the applicable requirements of Chapter XI-2 of the SOLAS Convention and the mandatory requirements of the IMO's International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code. In addition, in compliance with Regulation (EC) No 725/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 31 March 2004 on enhancing ship and port facility security, the Marine Survey Office of my Department requires that a for a ship intending to enter a port in the State, the following information is provided to it, prior to the arrival of the ship:-

- that the ship possesses a valid ISS Certificate and the name of its issuing authority;
- the security level at which the ship is currently operating;
- the security level at which the ship operated in the previous 10 ports where it has conducted a ship/port interface;
- any special or additional security measures that were taken by the ship in the previous 10 ports where it has conducted a ship/port interface;
- that the appropriate ship security procedures were maintained during any ship to ship activity carried out within the period of the last 10 port calls; or
- other practical security related information (but not details of the ship security plan), taking into account the guidance given in part B of the ISPS Code.

Ships that do not comply with the SOLAS maritime security requirements may be subject to additional controls, up to and including the refusal of access of a ship into Irish ports .

Driver Licences

848. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the way in which a motorcycle driver with a provisional licence can travel to attend the Garda Training College in June 2020 in view of the closure of the RSA and in view of the fact the driver's test has been cancelled. [8232/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): It is a matter for the individual concerned to make their own travel arrangements within the law. The Deputy will be aware that Templemore, the location of the Garda Training College, is served by a range of public transport services, including mainline rail services. I am sure the College can advise those attending of the details of those options and should be directly contacted for such information. It may also be prudent for the individual concerned to contact the College in relation to how its activities may be affected by the current emergency.

If I understand the Deputy correctly, this relates to a learner motorcyclist who has a valid learner permit. In the first instance, it should be noted that no learner should expect to receive a full licence when they undergo a driving test of the their competency.

Learner motorcyclists are not permitted on the roads until they have completed the mandatory course of Initial Basic Training. These are provided by driving schools which, as private firms, must make their own arrangements to comply with health and safety regulations, including public health requirements, as set out in the National Return to Work Safely Protocol.

If and when a learner motorcyclist has completed their Initial Basic Training, they may drive on the roads and do not require an accompanying driver.

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Question No. 849 answered with Question No. 832.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

850. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if additional supports are being prepared including funding for public transport companies impacted severely by Covid-19. [8257/20]

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 designated it amongst the essential services that have carried on during the Covid-19 emergency. I would like to thank the operators and their staff in continuing this essential service.

Throughout, the National Transport Authority (NTA) and the public transport operators have been closely following the public health advices. In line with those advices, they have implemented 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 the operators' 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*.

I have been clear that we will ensure that 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.

Consumer Rights

851. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the measures he will take to support consumer rights, particularly the difficulties experienced by persons receiving outstanding refunds from airlines; if figures are being compiled regarding the number of persons impacted; and the new approach that will be taken in view of the decision by the European Commission on cash refunds from airlines regarding cancelled flights. [8258/20]

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

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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.flightright.ie.

The Commission for Aviation Regulation is in the process of compiling figures regarding the number of persons impacted by flight disruptions and entitled to refunds.

Question No. 852 answered with Question No. 828.

Childcare Services

853. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the consideration being given to fund the wages of childcare workers to ensure reduced costs for parents and improve pay levels for childcare staff (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7412/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): Low pay and poor working conditions in the early learning and care and school-age childcare sector remain a serious concern and impact on the quality of provision to children through their effect on the recruitment and retention of qualified staff. The lack of consistency of care caused by high staff turnover impacts directly on quality, while low wages are a constraint on plans to upskill and professionalise the workforce.

As the State is not the employer, my Department does not pay the wages of staff working in early learning and care settings, and hence cannot set wage levels or determine working conditions for staff. I am, however, doing all that is in my power to improve wages and working conditions in the sector. My support for improved pay and conditions for early learning and care professionals has been explicit, as their role is critical to supporting children's development and delivering better outcomes for children and families.

My Department has set out its vision for the sector, and a roadmap to achieve it, in First 5, the whole-of-Government strategy for babies, young children and their families. First 5 recognises that the workforce is at the heart of high-quality early learning and care and school-age childcare and seeks to build 'an appropriately skilled and sustainable professional workforce that is supported and valued and reflects the diversity of babies, young children and their families'. First 5 includes a commitment to achieve a graduate-led workforce, and last year I began a process of developing a Workforce Development Plan to achieve this and other workforce-related commitments in First 5.

Delivering on a further commitment in First 5, last year I also appointed an Expert Group to develop a new Funding Model for early learning and care and school-age childcare. The Expert Group is tasked with examining the current model of funding, its effectiveness in delivering quality, affordable, sustainable and inclusive services and considering how additional resourcing can be delivered for the sector to achieve these objectives, drawing on international practice in this area.

The Expert Group is independently chaired and includes national and international experts in early learning and care and school-age childcare systems, funding and quality; economics; and relevant policy experts from the Government Departments which will be involved in implementing the new Funding Model. A research partner, Frontier Economics, has been appointed to support the work of the Expert Group.

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The most recent data on pay and conditions in the sector indicates that the average pay is influenced by the level of a practitioner's qualifications. For example, the average pay rates for graduate workers is somewhat higher than for others working in the sector. Practitioners with Level 5 and Level 6 qualifications earned an average of €11.42 and €12.63 respectively in 2019. The average rates of pay for graduates at that time were €13.93 for those with qualifications at Level 7 on the National Framework of Qualifications, €13.45 for those with Level 8 qualifications, and €15.18 for those with qualifications at Levels 9 or 10. Overall, the average hourly pay in early learning and care and school-age childcare was €12.55, which was 3% higher than the year before.

Budget 2020 saw a 9% increase in investment in early learning and care and school age childcare, resulting in a 141% increase in investment over five budgets. The very welcome level of investment needs to continue if we are to offer services that are of high quality, affordable and accessible. However, increased investment by itself will not ensure that staff wages and conditions will improve.

I have actively encouraged the sector to seek a Sectoral Employment Order (SEO). An SEO must be initiated by a grouping representing the sector and my Department is ready to input to such a process, if and when the sector seeks it. Organisations requesting the commencement of such a process must show they are substantially representative of the sector. An SEO would provide for mandatory terms and conditions in the early learning and care and school age childcare sector, minimum rates of remuneration, and other conditions.

Other recent measures I have taken to assist employers to improve the pay and conditions of their staff whilst also addressing administrative demands include: a 7% increase in ECCE capitation in 2018; higher capitation payments for graduates and Inclusion Coordinators; support for school-age childcare which will make it easier to offer full-time, full-year employment contracts; and a pilot measure to fund participation in continuous professional development (CPD).

Child Abuse

854. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if an independent public enquiry into an organisation (details supplied) will be initiated. [8158/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The initiation of any independent inquiry is a very significant matter and one which will require careful consideration.

As Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, I have previously taken a number of actions in response to allegations of poor safeguarding policies and practice in Scouting Ireland. These included the suspension of funding pending the appointment of a new Board, the appointment of Ms Jillian Van Turnhout to conduct a review of governance, which was completed in June 2018, and the requirement for regular updates on governance reforms by Scouting Ireland to my Department.

In addition, earlier this year, I appointed Ms Brigid McManus to conduct a follow-up review of governance in Scouting Ireland. This was published on 8th May and confirmed that all of Ms Van Turnhout's recommendations had been satisfactorily implemented, while outlining a small number of matters for follow up.

I welcome the publication by Mr. Elliott of his learning review into historical sexual abuse in scouting. My thoughts are with the adults who suffered so gravely as children through their involvement with scouting and who have carried this burden with them into their adult lives.

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I met with Mr Elliott, following receipt of his review, and was pleased to hear that, notwithstanding the seriousness of the findings, he was very positive about the current governance arrangements in Scouting Ireland, with a Board that is strong and well-functioning, and with robust safeguarding in place. Tusla has also written to the Department to indicate its satisfaction with current safeguarding practice in Scouting Ireland, particularly as it relates to the agreed Scouting Ireland / Tusla Action Plan.

The Government had previously undertaken to give careful consideration to the question of an appropriate statutory investigation following the RTÉ Investigates programme “Scouts Dishonour”. It was appropriate for Government to await the reports from Ms Brigid McManus and Mr Ian Elliott to inform this consideration. In this regard, it is noted that Mr Elliott’s report suggests that a statutory inquiry may face the same limitations as his Learning Review. Mr Elliott has also emphasised the cooperation of Scouting Ireland in relation to his review. As such, a key factor is whether a statutory or public inquiry would uncover new information. This is something which will need to be taken into account in contemplating the question of an inquiry.

School Attendance

855. Deputy Gary Gannon asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans to waive compulsory attendance with regard to primary, secondary and third-level courses (details supplied). [8219/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone)(Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) has statutory responsibility under the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 for ensuring all children attend school regularly. Educational Welfare Officers (EWO’s) work with families and children to overcome barriers to their school attendance, participation and retention.

All schools in Ireland closed on 12th March 2020 and currently remain closed. Under the Act compulsory school attendance is recorded on the school roll, which is marked daily when schools are open. No school roll has been marked on this basis since March 12th.

Since then Educational Welfare Officers have provided ongoing support to all open cases that it has received from schools with particular attention to students preparing for examinations (prior to decisions to defer examinations), children who have no school place for September 2020 and very vulnerable groups for example Traveller and Roma communities and children living in direct provision. TESS is currently reviewing all open and referred cases and all TESS services are working closely with schools to ensure that vulnerable children and young people are supported to participate in their education within the parameters of the current public health advice.

The Department of Education and Skills has advised that 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, HEIs are autonomous with regard to management of their academic affairs including attendance policies and the Department of Education and Skills has no role in relation to these policies. I can also advise that TESS nor my Department have no role in relation to attendance policies in these institutions.

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856. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if consideration has been given to the need for a sustainability fund in view of the fact that many early years providers are under severe pressure and may not reopen after restrictions have been lifted and the fact that this is having a major impact on workers and their incomes. [7045/20]

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

857. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the estimated cost of increasing the number of available hours under the ECCE scheme each week by 3, 5, 10 and 15 hours respectively; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7109/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): €297m has been allocated to the Early Childhood Care and Education programme in 2020.

The Early Childhood Care and Education programme runs for 38 weeks each programme year. The standard capitation rate paid to providers is €69 per child, per week. The higher capitation rate paid to services is €80.25 per child, per week. The programme currently provides 15 hours of free childcare per week.

The following table displays the full year financial impact of extending the hours available per week as per the question.

-		ECCE Hours Increase (€m)
Change	Annual Cost	Increase

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No Change	€297.0	€0.0
Plus 3 hours	€356.4	€59.4
Plus 5 hours	€396.0	€99.0
Plus 10 hours	€495.0	€198.0
Plus 15 hours	€594.0	€297.0

As AIM funding is intrinsically linked to ECCE capitations any increase in rates or durations for the ECCE programme has an impact on associated AIM costs.

AIM Levels 1 & 7 are awarded on a weekly basis, €2 per child per week and 195 euros per week respectively (the underlying basis for AIM Level 7 figure is the cost of ECCE capitation for 3 children). If an increase in hours of ECCE duration was required, there might be a case to increase AIM Level 1 & 7 capitations.

In 2020 €26m was allocated for AIM level 7 and €5.4m for AIM level 1. The following table captures the impacts of the outlined increases would have, based on a pro-rating of weekly to hourly costs, to the estimated allocation for AIM Levels 1 & 7 support costs in 2020.

-		Associate AIM Costs to ECCE Hours Increase (€m)
Change	Annual Cost	Increase
No Change	€31.4	€0.0
Plus 3 hours	€37.7	€6.3
Plus 5 hours	€41.8	€10.5
Plus 10 hours	€52.3	€20.9
Plus 15 hours	€62.8	€31.4

Covid-19 Pandemic

858. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans for the phased return of childcare facilities, particularly around social distancing and ratios of children; the way in which childcare facilities are to operate under the new guidelines; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7124/20]

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

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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. My Department has sought 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. This includes minimising the public health risk, especially given the difficulty of maintaining social distancing among young children and those caring for them, and the impacts that a potential change to staff ratio requirements would have on capacity, sustainability, and staff recruitment and retention.

In addition, it is vital that we, ensure that any restrictions are consistent with young children's well-being and development needs and for ELC and SAC provision at each phase to be child-centred.

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, 19 and 26 May. A schedule of weekly meetings has also been agreed.

I am also establishing a Reference Group to widen the scope of consultation with the ELC and SAC sector, to supplement the work of the Advisory Group and to give an opportunity to provider representatives who are not represented on this group to make their views known to me and my officials. I hope to hold periodic meetings of the Group as we work through the phased reopening of the ELC and SAC sector. The first meeting of the Reference Group will be held on Thursday, 28 May 2020.

The proposals for re-opening which are at an advanced stage 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.

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 29 June 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 and other resources as soon as possible after they have been finalised with the assistance of the Advisory Group.

Social Workers Recruitment

859. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if consideration will be given to allowing trainee social workers complete their placement in another way in order that they can receive their qualifications and not be delayed in accessing employment as social workers are needed; and if an agreement can be reached with CORU regarding this in view of the fact it would result in social worker qualifications being processed without

delay. [7125/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): While this is not a matter for my Department I am aware of it and I understand that the Higher Education Institutions are working with CORU on this matter.

Departmental Reports

860. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs when she will publish the Independent Review of Costs of Delivering Childcare in Ireland; the reason for the delay in its publication; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7237/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): Crowe was commissioned by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to undertake an independent review on the cost of providing quality childcare in Ireland. The brief included:

- analysing the current costs of providing childcare and the factors that impact on these costs;
- the development and delivery of a model of the unit costs of providing childcare that allows analysis of policy changes and variation in cost-drivers, including the potential impact of professionalisation; and
- providing an objective, high-level market analysis of the childcare sector in Ireland, including analysis of fee levels charged to parents.

An approach and methodology were decided upon in partnership with the DCYA and a number of key activities have been undertaken to date. These include:

- engagement with key stakeholders from the sector, including the Early Years Forum, provider representative organisations, the City and County Childcare Committees, statutory bodies, childcare professional training bodies, and academics;
- the administration of a survey to all centre-based childcare providers nationally, to provide the data on which the modelling tool would be based;
- the development of a cost modelling tool (and guidance document) to present the baseline cost data and enable the testing of the impact of a range of scenarios, namely changes to cost drivers on the unit costs of delivering childcare services; and
- a final report detailing the elements of the review, and the key findings.

The project is intended to provide a robust evidence base for the further development of high quality ELC and SAC in Ireland. The outputs, including the costs calculator developed through this project are also intended to form a key input into the setting of capitation and subvention rates for future funding schemes and will be considered by the Expert Group recently convened to develop a new funding model for ELC and SAC.

The draft final report, cost modelling tool and guidance were subject to peer review. Arising from the external peer review, an additional piece of work was undertaken. Final outputs were received in January 2020, and preparation was underway to launch the report in April 2020. However, owing to the volume of work associated with COVID-19, its launch has regrettably had to be postponed to Summer 2020.

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Home Tuition Scheme

861. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs when a decision will be made on home tuition for a child (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7270/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Department of Children and Youth Affairs does not operate a home tuition scheme for pre-school children.

The Department funds the ECCE preschool programme for children in the two years prior to school entry. To support children's inclusion in the ECCE programme, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) has since 2016 provided a range of supports for access and meaningful participation of children with disabilities. An increasing number of children with disabilities, including children with complex needs, have attended their local pre-school with the supports provided through AIM.

The AIM supports include a pilot (introduced in 2019) of nursing support and healthcare assistance for children with complex healthcare needs. This pilot measure is supporting a number of children in receipt of a paediatric home care package through the HSE to benefit also from nursing or healthcare assistance to permit their participation in the ECCE programme in a mainstream preschool setting.

In addition to the AIM supports in mainstream pre-schools, a small number of children with complex needs attend HSE-funded specialist pre-schools run by a number of agencies. The Donegal County Childcare Committee may be able to assist the family referred to by the Deputy in identifying potential pre-school options in the local area, and can be contacted on Tel: 074 91 23442 or by email at info@donegalchildcare.com .

Child and Family Agency

862. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if a Tusla facility (details supplied) will be examined; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7314/20]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

863. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if a proposal (details supplied) in relation to directly supporting partners of frontline workers is currently being considered following the cancellation of the proposal recently; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7329/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): As the Deputy is aware it was with regret that I had to cancel the Temporary Childcare Scheme for Essential Health Workers on the 13th May.

Identifying essential workers will be part of the wider Government effort to ensure that society and businesses are re-opened in a carefully managed and safe manner.

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The proposal submitted by the Deputy relates to operation of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), which is operated by Revenue and the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) which is operated by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP). As such I would not be in a position to speak to changes or the application of these schemes.

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

864. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the position regarding helping the education and childcare sector to reopen; the supports that will be available to the operators of these facilities to enable them to get up and running as soon as possible; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7387/20]

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.

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.

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I have already put in place a number of supports to assist ELC and SAC providers in this time. 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 ELC and SAC sector. It provides funds for staffing and overhead costs, while ensuring that parents are not charged fees for the duration of the scheme.

As part of pre-existing sustainability funding, 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.

These sector-specific supports are complemented by the range of supports across Government, many of which can also be availed of by ELC and SAC providers. This includes grants and loans for small businesses, advice and support from Local Enterprise Offices, the cancellation of commercial rates for a period, and a re-opening grant for small and medium enterprises. Further information on these supports is available from the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation.

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 29 June 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

865. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if a new public model of funding for the childcare sector (details supplied) will be considered; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7444/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): We have come a long way in recent years in improving Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) support in Ireland. Investment in ELC and SAC has increased by 141% over the last five years. This has enabled us deliver, for example, a second year of free pre-school to all children, the international award winning Access and Inclusion Model for children with disabilities, a doubling of the number of children in receipt of subsidies, an increase in the number of places by approximately 60%, and the highly innovative and progressive National Childcare Scheme. However, I acknowledge that regardless of the positive strides made, more investment is needed. Historic under investment in ELC and SAC has created a situation that has no quick solution.

In terms of policy approaches, my Department has set out its vision for the sector, and a roadmap to achieve it, in *First 5, A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*. A key vehicle to ensure that significant additional investment in the sector delivers for children, families and the State will be a new Funding Model. This new

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Funding Model will provide mechanisms to deliver additional funding to ELC and SAC providers to ensure greater levels of affordability, quality and inclusion in their services.

An Expert Group to develop the new Funding Model for ELC and SAC was announced in September 2019 and commenced its work in October 2019. The Expert Group is tasked with examining the current model of funding, its effectiveness in delivering quality, affordable, sustainable and inclusive services and considering how additional resourcing can be delivered for the sector to achieve these objectives, drawing on international practice in this area. The Expert Group's Terms of Reference includes to:

- Agree a set of guiding principles to underpin the new Funding Model for ELC and SAC
- Review the existing approach to funding ELC and SAC services by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in terms of its alignment with the guiding principles as well as effectiveness in delivering on the policy objectives of quality, affordability, accessibility and contributing to addressing disadvantage
- Drawing on international evidence, identify and consider options on how additional funding for ELC and SAC could be structured to deliver on the guiding principles and above policy objectives
- Agree a final report including a proposed design for a new Funding Model, with accompanying costings, risk analysis and mitigation and phased implementation plan (with funding likely to become available on an incremental basis) to recommend to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and ultimately Government.

The Expert Group is independently chaired and includes national and international experts in ELC and SAC systems, funding and quality; economics; and relevant policy experts from the Government Departments which will be involved in implementing the new Funding Model. A research partner, Frontier Economics, has been appointed to support the work of the Expert Group.

A consultation and engagement process to take account of the voices of providers, practitioners, parents and other stakeholders within the sector had to be postponed due to COVID-19. Further information on the Funding Model and its progress is available at: first5fundingmodel.gov.ie

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 this has had on ELC and SAC providers, practitioners, parents and children. 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.

As a direct response to the COVID-19 closure of ELC and SAC services, I launched the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS) which 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

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in the sector.

The TWSCS builds on the wider provisions by Government and recognises the unique place and importance of the ELC and SAC sector.

Overall, Budget 2020 saw a 9% increase in investment in ELC and SAC. Additional investment of €63.6m brought investment to €638m in 2020, as noted a 141% increase in investment over five budgets. The very welcome level of investment needs to continue if we are to offer services that are of high quality, affordable and accessible. However, increased investment by itself will not ensure these policy outcomes.

My Department has made considerable investment in the sector in recent years. I want to preserve the fruits of this investment for children, families and our much valued ELC and SAC workforce and ensure that, when COVID- 19 has passed, we will have retained as many services, staff and places as possible and that we are moving progressively towards the vision outlined in First 5 which was unanimously welcomed by all stakeholders.

I welcome a recent evaluation by the European Commission which noted that substantial progress had been made in recent years in the area of childcare. It recognised the systemic, comprehensive and strategic cross Government approach that had been adopted, the development of important legislation in the area and the solid plans for the future. My Department remains committed to maintaining this momentum and transforming early learning and care to a system that is truly accessible, affordable and of high quality.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

866. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs when promised childcare for front-line workers will be provided; and if the facilitation of spouses of front-line workers working in public service to be offered paid leave to care for their children has been ruled out. [7475/20]

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.

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.

The facilitation of paid leave for public service employees is not a matter for the DCYA. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) have circulated Guidance and FAQs for Public Service Employers during COVID-19. This includes guidance in relation to facilitation of essential health workers.

Child and Family Agency

867. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the situation regarding 16 and 17 year old children that have emotional dysregulation and urgently need

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temporary residential care; the facilities available in each region to provide care outside of the adult psychiatric services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7588/20]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

868. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs when childminders will be able to recommence providing services to parents that are healthcare workers, essential workers and all parents in their own homes and in the home of the child. [7608/20]

869. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if guidelines have been created to support childminders reopening their services following the easing of Covid-19 restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7610/20]

870. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if financial supports will be made available to childminders for the purpose purchasing PPE material. [7615/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): I propose to take Questions Nos. 868 to 870, inclusive, together.

As the Deputy is aware, at present the public health guidance issued by the HSE is that childminding should only take place in the child's home, not in a childminder's home. This is to avoid households mixing, and is important as part of the stay at home measures.

On 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, which includes childminding, 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 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 re-opening services is informed by the practical constraints that services - including childminders - 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.

Officials in my Department are currently liaising with the Health Protection Surveillance

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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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

871. **Deputy Darragh O'Brien** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the membership of her advisory group on reopening early learning and care and school-age childcare services; and the process by which the members of the working group were selected. [7649/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The members of the Advisory Group on the phased re-opening of childcare services are the Association of Childhood Professionals, the Community Forum, Early Childhood Ireland, National Childhood Network, PLÉ and Seas Suas, Childminding Ireland and SIPTU. Pobal and Tusla are also members of the Advisory Group.

In establishing the Advisory Group, I provided six places for sectoral representatives. The sector itself decided on the nominees and these include representatives from the Association of Childhood Professionals, PLÉ, Seas Suas, Early Childhood Ireland, the National Childhood Network and the National Community Forum. Many of these groups represent providers. I included Childminding Ireland and SIPTU as members of the group, as they represent key parts of the early years sector not included in the list above, ie childcare staff and childminders.

A number of additional provider representative groups have contacted my Department seeking to be added to the membership of the Advisory Group. In response to such requests, I have established a Reference Group, to supplement the work of the Advisory Group. The Reference Group includes representatives from the Federation of Early Childhood, the Association of Full-time Day care Providers, St Nicholas Montessori and a number of service providers. I will chair the first meeting of the Reference Group on 28 May.

In addition to the above, my officials are also engaging directly with all 4,500 providers across the country through regular emails, and are seeking their input to COVID related challenges through a survey of all providers and an open call for submissions.

Covid-19 Pandemic

872. **Deputy Darragh O'Brien** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if issues raised in correspondence (details supplied) will be considered in relation to the advisory group on reopening early learning and care and school-age childcare services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7650/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy is aware that the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented situation that has required a series of emergency responses from the Government and my Department.

My Department and I are engaging extensively with stakeholders in the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age (SAC) sector, including the representative groups referred to by the Deputy.

Consultation with stakeholders has always been central to the work of my Department, and the Early Years Forum (EY Forum) is a key part of this. The EY Forum meets several times a year and includes representatives of providers, parents and academics with an interest in the

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ELC and SAC sector. I established the 'EY Forum Plus' in March 2020 to widen representation by the sector, to aid my Department in developing a response to Covid-19. The representative groups referred to by the Deputy are members of the EY Forum Plus, which has met on a number of occasions over the past three months. Additionally there has been several more informal interactions between the representative groups and my officials where their points of view were listened to and information shared with them.

I recently established an Advisory Group on the phased re-opening of childcare services. It had its first meeting on 13 May and has met 3 times since. In establishing the group, I provided six places for sectoral representatives. The sector itself decided on the nominees and these include representatives from the Association of Childhood Professionals, PLÉ, Seas Suas, Early Childhood Ireland, the National Childhood Network and the National Community Forum. Many of these groups represent providers. Childminding Ireland and SIPTU are also members of the group.

A number of additional provider representative groups have contacted my Department seeking to be added to the membership of the Advisory Group, including the groups referred to by the Deputy. In response to such requests, I have established a Reference Group, to supplement the work of the Advisory Group. I will chair the first meeting of the Reference Group on 28 May. The representative groups referred to by the Deputy has accepted my invitation to join the Reference Group and I have made clear that I welcome any submissions any of the representative groups may wish to make at any time.

In addition to the above, my officials are also engaging directly with all 4,500 providers across the country through regular emails, and are seeking their input to COVID related challenges through a survey of all providers and an open call for submissions.

Covid-19 Pandemic

873. Deputy Darragh O'Brien asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if research has been undertaken by her Department in order to determine the possible impact of Covid-19 on capacity within the ECCE system in terms of crèche closures and the reduction in capacity associated with social distancing measures; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7656/20]

877. Deputy Darragh O'Brien asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if her Department has undertaken research in order to determine the possible impact of Covid-19 on capacity within the full-day childcare system in terms of crèche closures and the reduction in capacity associated with social distancing measures; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7660/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): I propose to take Questions Nos. 873 and 877 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 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

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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, including, as referred to by the Deputy, the issues around capacity and how for example the ECCE programme may operate from September. This is complex work and must balance a number of important issues. My Department has sought 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 pre-school 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, 19 and 26 May. A schedule of weekly meetings has also been agreed.

I am also establishing a Reference Group to widen the scope of consultation with the ELC and SAC sector, to supplement the work of the Advisory Group and to give an opportunity to provider representatives who are not represented on this group to make their views known to me and my officials. I hope to hold periodic meetings of the Group as we work through the phased reopening of the ELC and SAC sector. The first meeting of the Reference Group will be held on Thursday, 28 May 2020.

In collaboration with this Advisory Group, officials in my Department are undertaking primary research which is currently being rolled out in order to help us forecast supply and demand in the sector for safely delivering early learning and care and school age childcare in the coming months. Arising from that work, my Department will seek to identify ways to maximise capacity in the best interests of children and parents, while meeting the need to ensure that services re-open safely.

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.

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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 29 June 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

874. Deputy Darragh O'Brien asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if ECCE services will be able to operate at full capacity in September 2020; and if not, the percentage of their previous capacity they will be able to operate. [7657/20]

876. Deputy Darragh O'Brien asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if she has considered introducing temporary measures in order to bring additional ECCE capacity on stream more quickly in view of the possible deficit of places which may arise as a result of Covid-19. [7659/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): I propose to take Questions Nos. 874 and 876 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 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, including, as referred to by the Deputy, the issues around capacity and how for example the ECCE programme may operate from September. This is complex work and must balance a number of important issues. My Department has sought 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

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and development needs and for ELC and SAC provision at each phase to be child-centred

- Providing ELC for pre-school 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, 19 and 26 May. A schedule of weekly meetings has also been agreed.

I am also establishing a Reference Group to widen the scope of consultation with the ELC and SAC sector, to supplement the work of the Advisory Group and to give an opportunity to provider representatives who are not represented on this group to make their views known to me and my officials. I hope to hold periodic meetings of the Group as we work through the phased reopening of the ELC and SAC sector. The first meeting of the Reference Group will be held on Thursday, 28 May 2020.

In collaboration with this Advisory Group, officials in my Department are undertaking primary research which is currently being rolled out in order to help us forecast supply and demand in the sector for safely delivering early learning and care and school age childcare in the coming months. Arising from that work, my Department will seek to identify ways to maximise capacity in the best interests of children and parents, while meeting the need to ensure that services re-open safely.

The proposals for re-opening in Phase 3, which are at an advanced stage, 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. Once the plans for Phase 3 and 4 are finalised, my Department will place a greater focus on resumption of ECCE.

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 29 June 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

875. **Deputy Darragh O'Brien** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of children expected to enrol in ECCE services from September 2020, by county. [7658/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The COVID-19 Pandemic has created major challenges for Ireland. The closure of centre-based Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) services including those providing Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services on 12 March was an unexpected but necessary move to safeguard public health in Ireland.

On Friday 1 May, the Government published the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, which sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions. 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. I am conscious that the proposed timelines in the Roadmap are subject to further NPHEAT advice, and decisions from Government.

My Department is not in a position, at this time, to give a figure for enrolment in ECCE services in September 2020. However, the enrolment figures for the 2019/20 ECCE programme year are an indication of potential numbers. The following table sets out these figures, on a per county basis. Additionally, some ECCE eligible children will be enrolled on other DCYA schemes, but avail of the ECCE programme through those schemes.

County	ECCE Children 2019/20
Carlow	1180
Cavan	1934
Clare	2561
Cork	13002
Donegal	3443
Dublin	27385
Galway	5890
Kerry	3031
Kildare	5841
Kilkenny	2108
Laois	2095
Leitrim	710
Limerick	4332
Longford	828
Louth	2901
Mayo	2797
Meath	5407
Monaghan	1328
Offaly	1796
Roscommon	1287
Sligo	1292
Tipperary	3486
Waterford	2427

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County	ECCE Children 2019/20
Westmeath	2295
Wexford	3427
Wicklow	3615
Totals	106398

Question No. 876 answered with Question No. 874.

Question No. 877 answered with Question No. 873.

Covid-19 Pandemic

878. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the definition of essential workers that will be offered childcare under phase 3 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; the way in which the definition was reached; if a list of essential workers is available in order to inform employees if they will be entitled to childcare; the childcare plans in place for workers not deemed essential; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7706/20]

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.

My Department remains strongly focused on developing solutions to the significant challenges of a phased reopening of early learning and care and childcare facilities for 29 June 2020.

The Roadmap proposes the gradual re-opening of ELC/SAC services across all phases 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; and

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.

Essential workers are workers providing an essential service. A list of services that are currently defined as essential can be found on <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/dfeb8f-list-of-essential-service-providers-under-new-public-health-guidelin/>. Any amendments to this list of essential services are a matter for Government.

The phased re-opening enables some time and planning to ensure re-opening in an orderly, safe and sustainable manner. 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.

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

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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, 19 and 26 May. A schedule of weekly meetings has also been agreed.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

879. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the name and location of the crèches that signed up to the outreach service that was due to commence on 18 June 2020, in tabular form; if the services were community or private; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7707/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy will appreciate that it is not appropriate for me to name the crèches that volunteered for this scheme. I can confirm that of the 7 Providers that came forward 1 was a community service and 6 were private services. I can further inform the Deputy that providers volunteered from the following counties; Dublin, Galway, Limerick and Kerry.

Covid-19 Pandemic

880. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans for reopening childcare facilities under the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business; and the way in which this will be managed safely. [7712/20]

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. My Department has sought public health advice in relation to the plans being put forward, in order to ensure that the

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reopening of ELC and SAC services is managed safely. 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 pre-school 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, 19 and 26 May. A schedule of weekly meetings has also been agreed.

The proposals for re-opening which are well advanced 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 the circa 2000 ELC and SAC services around the country that normally open in July and August are currently considering how they can be part of helping Ireland get back to work, and how they 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

881. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if the opening of crèches and schools will be expedited in order to protect the development of chil-

dren. [7748/20]

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.

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, 19 and 26 May. A schedule of weekly meetings has also been agreed.

The proposals for re-opening which are at an advanced stage 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.

In the interim, my Department has undertaken a number of actions to support children during this difficult time, including the Lets Play Ireland campaign and online resources (on the First 5 website) for parents of young children. My Department has also developed an online parent's centre with information on a wide range of issues relevant to parents.

I know the Deputy is as concerned as I am about the health and well-being of young children. Be assured that I intend to move carefully but in a steadfast manner to reopen crèches and pre-schools as soon as possible and in line with public health advice.

Childcare Services

882. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of childminders that have registered quarterly in each of the years 2017 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [7792/20]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

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883. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the reason an organisation (details supplied) has not been included in talks taking place on the reopening of the childcare sector; the criteria used to select the representative groups; if she has received communications from the organisation or its members asking to be included in the talks; if she will add the group to the talks; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7806/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy is aware that the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented situation that has required a series of emergency responses from the Government and my Department.

My Department and I are engaging extensively with stakeholders in the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age (SAC) sector, including the representative group referred to by the Deputy.

Consultation with stakeholders has always been central to the work of my Department, and the Early Years Forum (EY Forum) is a key part of this. The EY Forum meets several times a year and includes representatives of providers, parents and academics with an interest in the ELC and SAC sector. I established the 'EY Forum Plus' in March 2020 to widen representation by the sector, to aid my Department in developing a response to Covid-19. The representative group referred to by the Deputy is a member of the EY Forum Plus, which has met on a number of occasions over the past three months. Additionally there has been several more informal interactions between the representative group and my officials where their point of view was listened to and information shared with them.

I recently established an Advisory Group on the phased re-opening of childcare services. It had its first meeting on 13 May and has met 3 times since. In establishing the group, I provided six places for sectoral representatives. The sector itself decided on the nominees and these include representatives from the Association of Childhood Professionals, PLÉ, Seas Suas, Early Childhood Ireland, the National Childhood Network and the National Community Forum. Many of these groups represent providers. Childminding Ireland and SIPTU are also members of the group.

A number of additional provider representative groups have contacted my Department seeking to be added to the membership of the Advisory Group, including the group referred to by the Deputy. In response to such requests, I have established a Reference Group, to supplement the work of the Advisory Group. I will chair the first meeting of the Reference Group on 28 May. The representative group referred to by the Deputy has accepted my invitation to join the Reference Group and I have made clear that I welcome any submissions the group may wish to make at any time.

In addition to the above, my officials are also engaging directly with all 4,500 providers across the country through regular emails, and are seeking their input to COVID related challenges through a survey of all providers and an open call for submissions.

Covid-19 Pandemic

884. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if her Department has engaged substantially with an organisation (details supplied) in reference to the Covid-19 crisis. [7819/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy is aware that the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented situation that has required a series of emergency responses from the Government and my Department.

Questions - Written Answers

My Department and I are engaging extensively with stakeholders in the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age (SAC) sector, including the representative group referred to by the Deputy.

Consultation with stakeholders has always been central to the work of my Department, and the Early Years Forum (EY Forum) is a key part of this. The EY Forum meets several times a year and includes representatives of providers, parents and academics with an interest in the ELC and SAC sector. I established the 'EY Forum Plus' in March 2020 to widen representation by the sector, to aid my Department in developing a response to Covid-19. The group referred to by the Deputy is a member of this Forum Plus group, which has met on a number of occasions over the past three months. In addition, there has been a number of informal engagements by its representative where officials have listened to the group's views and experiences, and provided information.

I recently established an Advisory Group on the phased re-opening of childcare services, which had its first meeting on 13 May. When establishing the group, I made six places available to the sector. The sector itself chose its six representatives. These include representatives from the Association of Childhood Professionals, Seas Suas, PLÉ, the National Children's Network, the National Community Forum and Early Childhood Ireland. Many of these represent providers. Childminding Ireland and SIPTU also sit on the group.

A number of provider representative groups have contacted my Department seeking to be added to the membership of the Advisory Group, including the group referred to by the Deputy. In response to such requests, I have established a Reference Group, to supplement the work of the Advisory Group. I will chair the first meeting of the Reference Group on 28 May. The representative group referred to by the Deputy has accepted my invitation to join the Reference Group. I continue to encourage submissions from all representatives of the sector.

Insurance Coverage

885. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the measures she has taken to ensure that all childcare facilities are provided insurance cover for Covid-19 when they reopen; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7924/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy is aware that childcare providers are private sector operators, 75% of which are private companies or sole traders, with 25% being community based services. Insurance for childcare providers is provided by a small number of commercial underwriters and brokers.

My Department has been in contact with the insurance sector to see what cover can be provided for the phased reopening of centre based early learning and care. Allianz, who provides insurance for 95% of centre based early learning and care providers, have confirmed that they will provide insurance for services which reopen in accordance with the Government Roadmap, and that they will not apply a Covid-19 exclusion.

Providers' existing insurance policies will apply, provided that they adhere to the measures and guidelines for reopening which will be set out by my Department, the HSE and other relevant authorities.

As reopening will be on a phased basis, some children may need to move, on a temporary basis, to a new childcare provider. Allianz has agreed to insure the new childcare providers in such cases, subject to appropriate risk assessments and checks being undertaken, as would ordinarily be the case when registering a new child.

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Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

886. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the measures and supports that will be in place for childcare centres when they reopen; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7925/20]

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. My Department has sought 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 pre-school 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, Na-

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tional 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, 19 and 26 May. A schedule of weekly meetings has also been agreed.

I am also establishing a Reference Group to widen the scope of consultation with the ELC and SAC sector, to supplement the work of the Advisory Group and to give an opportunity to provider representatives who are not represented on this group to make their views known to me and my officials. I hope to hold periodic meetings of the Group as we work through the phased reopening of the ELC and SAC sector. The first meeting of the Reference Group will be held on Thursday, 28 May 2020.

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 all circa 2000 ELC and SAC services around the country which are normally open in July and August are currently considering how they can be part of helping Ireland get back to work, and how they 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 and a range of other resources as soon as possible after they have been finalised with the assistance of the Advisory Group.

Insurance Coverage

887. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the action she will take to ensure childcare providers insurance includes cover for Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8056/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The Deputy is aware that childcare providers are private sector operators, 75% of which are private companies or sole traders, with 25% being community based services. Insurance for childcare providers is provided by a small number of commercial underwriters and brokers.

My Department has been in contact with the insurance sector to see what cover can be provided for the phased reopening of centre based early learning and care. Allianz, who provides insurance for 95% of centre based early learning and care providers, have confirmed that they will provide insurance for services which reopen in accordance with the Government Roadmap, and that they will not apply a Covid-19 exclusion.

Providers' existing insurance policies will apply, provided that they adhere to the measures and guidelines for reopening which will be set out by my Department, the HSE and other relevant authorities.

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As reopening will be on a phased basis, some children may need to move, on a temporary basis, to a new childcare provider. Allianz has agreed to insure the new childcare providers in such cases, subject to appropriate risk assessments and checks being undertaken, as would ordinarily be the case when registering a new child.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

888. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the proposals she put forward at the recent EU meeting of youth ministers in respect of the need to provide additional supports to young persons through the youth sector; if the EU will provide funding to support the provision of vital services for young persons through these difficult times; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8070/20]

889. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the additional funding that will be provided to the youth sector to support young persons particularly disadvantaged and vulnerable young persons during these difficult times; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8071/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): I propose to take Questions Nos. 888 and 889 together.

As the Deputy may appreciate I must be mindful of the ongoing talks on Government formation in making any comments on future funding or policies.

In the present difficult circumstances, I have made my position clear that the funding provided to youth services across the country is both necessary and essential. Funding to services, for youth clubs and to national youth organisations has been maintained. I secured €61.79 million in current funding for my Department's youth funding, an increase of €1.4 million on 2019.

My officials have been in regular contact with national youth organisation and the Education and Training Boards to monitor the situation affecting youth services funded by my Department. I applaud the many services that are delivering essential work in their communities and that have innovated and adapted to find new and different ways of engaging young persons.

Many organisations now find themselves in financial difficulty due to the ongoing crisis. My colleague the Minister for Rural and Community Development put in place a scheme using Dormant Accounts funding. This comprises €35 million for a Covid-19 Stability Fund and €5 million as a commitment to a Philanthropy Fund, 'Innovate Together', to focus on projects that provide innovative and adaptive solutions to existing and emerging challenges.

I can further advise the Deputy that services that have had to reduce services or hours may be in a position to avail of the other supports provided by the Government, and information is available on the website www.gov.ie, regarding the respective roles of Revenue and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

With regard to the informal video conference of EU Ministers for Youth on the 19 May, I communicated my intention to continue funding for youth organisations in Ireland throughout this crisis period. I highlighted in particular how this funding would allow the continuation of targeted youth support to marginalised, disadvantaged and vulnerable young people.

Child Abuse

Questions - Written Answers

890. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans to set up a public enquiry into an organisation (details supplied) in view of the publication of a report to establish the facts formally, including an examination of the actions of staff and volunteers and to make recommendations for change; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8129/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): The initiation of any independent inquiry is a very significant matter and one which will require careful consideration.

As Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, I have previously taken a number of actions in response to allegations of poor safeguarding policies and practice in Scouting Ireland. These included the suspension of funding pending the appointment of a new Board, the appointment of Ms Jillian Van Turnhout to conduct a review of governance, which was completed in June 2018, and the requirement for regular updates on governance reforms by Scouting Ireland to my Department.

In addition, earlier this year, I appointed Ms Brigid McManus to conduct a follow-up review of governance in Scouting Ireland. This was published on 8th May and confirmed that all of Ms Van Turnhout's recommendations had been satisfactorily implemented, while outlining a small number of matters for follow up.

I welcome the publication by Mr. Elliott of his learning review into historical sexual abuse in scouting. My thoughts are with the adults who suffered so gravely as children through their involvement with scouting and who have carried this burden with them into their adult lives.

I met with Mr Elliott, following receipt of his review, and was pleased to hear that, notwithstanding the seriousness of the findings, he was very positive about the current governance arrangements in Scouting Ireland, with a Board that is strong and well-functioning, and with robust safeguarding in place. Tusla has also written to the Department to indicate its satisfaction with current safeguarding practice in Scouting Ireland, particularly as it relates to the agreed Scouting Ireland / Tusla Action Plan.

The Government had previously undertaken to give careful consideration to the question of an appropriate statutory investigation following the RTÉ Investigates programme "Scouts Dishonour". It was appropriate for Government to await the reports from Ms Brigid McManus and Mr Ian Elliott to inform this consideration. In this regard, it is noted that Mr Elliott's report suggests that a statutory inquiry may face the same limitations as his Learning Review. Mr Elliott has also emphasised the cooperation of Scouting Ireland in relation to his review. As such, a key factor is whether a statutory or public inquiry would uncover new information. This is something which will need to be taken into account in contemplating the question of an inquiry.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

891. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs her plans to provide childcare for healthcare workers; her further plans to bring forward a suitable scheme without further delay; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8168/20]

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 chal-

lenges 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.

Domestic Violence Refuges Provision

892. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if there has been an increase in demand for refuges for victims of domestic violence during the Covid-19 pandemic; the number of beds and space available to families and persons; the conditions in homes during the Covid-19 pandemic; if they are experiencing overcrowding; if there a few or no vacancies; if they face new or unusual challenges including social distancing, rotation, distance from abusers and health safety issues; and if additional supports including financial have been made available to existing service providers during the crisis. [8263/20]

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. DCYA is providing Tusla with €25.3m this year for some 60 organisations that deliver services for these victims. This includes funding and coordinated supports for 21 services that provide emergency refuge and non-refuge accommodation to victims of domestic violence.

Tusla has advised that there is currently a relatively low demand for refuge, with some vacant units, most likely reflecting challenges for women around access to services in the current context rather than lower levels of need. Levels of demand are however, beginning to rise.

Tusla is aware of reduced capacity within some refuges, due to requirements to enforce social distancing or self-isolation measures, particularly where communal facilities may exist. There is also a requirement for additional capacity to address medically advised self-isolation requirements for service users. As facilities, accommodation and arrangements are specific to each service, Tusla is working with individual organisations to address any challenges arising in maintaining essential service provision.

Tusla reports that as of 22 May 2020, 101 of the 139 family units that would usually be available for victims of domestic violence, were also in use or available for use. To mitigate the impact of social distancing and isolation measures, an additional 45 refuge and non-refuge accommodation units for service users have been secured in the community (as of 22 May 2020), through the efforts of local services with support from Tusla. In total, Tusla had 146 family units available to it on 22 May 2020.

Tusla is aware that there are and will be issues for service providers, including refuges, throughout and beyond the period of the current emergency public health measures. Tusla has redeployed six members of staff to emergency accommodation services for victims of domestic violence. A total of 18 relief staff are in use across the system, as of 22 May 2020. Tusla has also provided a guidance document to all refuges, mainly in regard to contingency planning in the current health crisis. All guidance is in line with public health guidelines from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and the Health Service Executive (HSE).

It should be emphasised that the current restrictions on movement do not apply to a person escaping from a risk of harm or seeking to access essential services, such as persons experiencing domestic violence. Tusla provides financial support to the Women's Aid and Male Advice helplines, so that anyone experiencing domestic violence can receive assistance and advice at

a time of need.

To date, Tusla has provided additional funding of approximately €279,964 across DSGBV services since the commencement of the COVID-19 crisis in Ireland. This includes funding for additional staffing, ICT resources for staff working from home, and access to additional accommodation. The matter of funding will be kept under review, and Tusla will continue to engage with service providers regarding issues and difficulties that may arise at this time.

Burial Grounds

893. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if new schemes have been announced to provide funding to community groups maintaining cemeteries no longer able to carry out maintenance due to social distancing requirements and that can no longer fundraise or raise funds through donations in the community to pay contractors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7295/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): Under the Local Government (Sanitary Services) Acts, 1878 to 2001, local authorities are deemed to be burial boards for their respective functional areas. Acting in their capacity as burial boards, local authorities are responsible for the management, regulation and control of burial grounds in their functional area.

While my Department does not provide direct funding or grant assistance for the normal provision and maintenance of burial grounds, it does provide a range of supports to communities nationwide, helping people to participate in the development of their communities and providing funding to improve community facilities. For example, my Department funds the Community Enhancement Programme (CEP) which provides grants that may be relevant.

The CEP provided capital grants to the total value of €4.5m in 2019. Typical projects funded under this programme can include the renovation of community centres, community amenities, improvements to town parks, common areas and spaces, CCTV equipment and energy efficiency-type projects. The CEP is administered by the Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) in each Local Authority area.

My Department is considering the appropriate approach for many of its programmes in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 Community Enhancement Programme is also being considered in that context.

LEADER Programmes

894. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the position regarding the operation of the rural LEADER programme; the amount of rural LEADER funding drawn down to date for each of the 28 local action groups sub-regional areas; the amount of LEADER funding spent in each local action group, LAG, area; the number and types of projects completed to date in each LAG area; his plans to ensure that the deadlines for making applications under rural LEADER can be extended by each LAG in view of the Covid-19 emergency; his further plans to ensure that LAGs are supported to work with their local communities during the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7054/20]

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.

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€225 million of this funding has been allocated as core funding to the 29 Local Action Groups (LAGs) that deliver the LEADER programme. This funding is allocated to the LAGs for the full period of the programme rather than on an annual basis, to allow full flexibility to the LAGs.

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 the total spend to date by the LAGs since the commencement of the 2014-2020 LEADER programme and includes:

- 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

Table 2 provides details of:

- the number of completed projects in each LAG area by project theme, where a final payment has issued.

The figures provided do not include payments made under national-level thematic schemes referred to above, which are funded outside of the core budget allocated to each LAG.

Funding under LEADER is drawn down as projects 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.

Under the current LEADER programme, LAGs can continue to approve projects up to the end of December 2020. Payments can continue to be made drawn down after that date in respect of projects approved before the end of 2020.

The LEADER programme has remained operational throughout the COVID-19 crisis and payments have continued to be made to the Local Action Groups (LAGs), their Implementing Partners and to project promoters.

Nonetheless, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, my Department has recognised the challenges faced by the LAGs in delivering the LEADER programme and, in that regard, has introduced a number of administrative flexibilities to support their ongoing operations. This, in turn, will assist project promoters. My Department's officials will keep this matter under review and will consider introducing further administrative flexibilities where deemed necessary.

Table 1: LEADER expenditure data as of 25th May 2020

Local Action Group	Total Spend
Carlow	€2,884,826
Cavan	€3,838,642
Clare	€4,169,366
Cork North	€2,812,473
Cork South	€1,528,985
Cork West	€2,221,010
Donegal	€6,631,266

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Local Action Group	Total Spend
Dublin Rural	€2,306,098
Galway East	€3,065,856
Galway West	€1,525,267
Kerry	€6,139,261
Kildare	€1,794,115
Kilkenny	€2,945,511
Laois	€2,200,402
Leitrim	€3,024,946
Limerick	€5,128,258
Longford	€2,397,698
Louth	€2,737,583
Mayo	€5,816,138
Meath	€2,169,064
Monaghan	€3,170,618
Offaly	€4,631,098
Roscommon	€3,113,320
Sligo	€3,409,472
Tipperary	€5,047,557
Waterford	€4,309,024
Westmeath	€2,879,103
Wexford	€3,958,513
Wicklow	€2,126,483
Total	€97,981,953

Table 2: No. of LEADER projects completed by LAG and Theme as of 25th May 2020

Local Action Group	Rural Economic Development, Enterprise Development and Job Creation Theme	Rural Environment Theme	Social Inclusion Theme	Total
Carlow	25	0	1	26
Cavan	32	1	15	48
Clare	42	5	24	71
Cork North	21	1	18	40
Cork South	4	0	12	16
Cork West	8	0	12	20
Donegal	46	4	44	94
Dublin Rural	16	2	14	32
Galway East	16	1	17	34
Galway West	15	1	11	27
Kerry	125	7	39	171
Kildare	9	1	5	15

Local Action Group	Rural Economic Development, Enterprise Development and Job Creation Theme	Rural Environment Theme	Social Inclusion Theme	Total
Kilkenny	28	1	10	39
Laois	40	3	8	51
Leitrim	33	7	12	52
Limerick	21	7	25	53
Longford	35	0	11	46
Louth	38	8	20	66
Mayo	49	14	22	85
Meath	23	4	5	32
Monaghan	17	3	11	31
Offaly	62	6	34	102
Roscommon	15	1	9	25
Sligo	43	1	25	69
Tipperary	42	10	25	77
Waterford	34	1	8	43
Westmeath	34	1	15	50
Wexford	23	1	40	64
Wicklow	21	6	2	29
Grand Total	917	97	494	1508

Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

895. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if an application for funding (details supplied) will be examined with a view to approving the grant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7569/20]

896. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if an application for funding (details supplied) will be examined with a view to approving the grant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7570/20]

897. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if an application for funding (details supplied) will be examined with a view to approving the grant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7571/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): I propose to take Questions Nos. 895 to 897, inclusive, together.

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 second call for Category 2 applications for the Fund closed at on the 28th February and there was an excellent response from all across the country. My Department received 76 applications for funding under the call.

Questions - Written Answers

My Department is currently undertaking the initial assessment of the applications. The applications will then be discussed by the Project Advisory Board for the Fund, which is comprised of representatives from key Government Departments and independent experts.

On completion of this process, my Department will prepare a report setting out the projects which are recommended for approval and my role as Minister will be to consider that report and make final decisions in relation to the allocation of funding. I confirm the applications you referred to have been received.

Community Development Projects

898. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when voluntary-run community centres can reopen to the public; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7597/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): Community Centres are the cornerstone of community life in many towns, villages and urban areas around the country, and I recognise the important role they play in life in Ireland.

My Department provides funding to over 400 community organisations under the Community Services Programme (CSP), some of which are operating community centres. Pobal, which administers the Programme on behalf of the Department, is contacting the organisations concerned to establish their plans for reopening under the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. The timing of this will differ for each community centre, as it will be dependent on the services each centre provides and also the size of the facility to enable it to adhere to physical distancing requirements.

Further information regarding the Government's Roadmap is available on the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/roadmap>.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

899. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if the deadline will be extended for the Covid-19 stability scheme for community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises beyond 20 May 2020 in view of the difficulties the Covid-19 restrictions have placed on the ability of organisations to gather certificates, quotations, information, contact persons and so on. [7654/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): The Community and Voluntary Sector Covid-19 Stability Fund is intended to be a targeted once-off cash injection for organisations and groups currently delivering critical front-line services to the most at need in our society and in danger of imminent closure due to lost fund-raised or traded income as a direct result of restrictions to counter the spread of COVID-19.

This scheme is funded by Dormant Accounts Funding and so the criteria align with its objective to support:

1. The personal and social development of persons who are economically or socially disadvantaged; or
2. The educational development of persons who are educationally disadvantaged; or

3. Persons with a disability.

Mindful of the difficulties and issues raised by the sector, the Stability Scheme was established to urgently assist organisations in immediate risk of closure. The application process for the Stability Scheme was designed to avoid placing unnecessary or onerous administrative burdens on the applicant organisations and in this context there is no requirement for certificates or quotations to be uploaded. This was to ensure swift turnaround times to facilitate draw down of funds by eligible applicants so that they may continue to provide critical services to those most in need in our communities across Ireland.

The application deadline was extended by one day in order to facilitate those organisations that had technical issues or required clarification on their eligibility. The application process closed at 8pm on Thursday 21st May 2020. The Scheme has received over 1,000 applications and the assessment and approval process is currently underway. Organisations approved for funding from the Stability Fund will be informed in the coming weeks.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

900. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of community groups that qualified under the terms of the Covid-19 Stability Fund for Community and Voluntary, Charity and Social Enterprises; the nature of the organisations which met the objectives; the way in which their eligibility was determined; if he will broaden the criteria to allow more community groups apply; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7814/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): The Community and Voluntary Sector Covid-19 Stability Fund is intended to be a targeted once-off cash injection for organisations and groups currently delivering critical front-line services to those most in need in our society and in danger of imminent closure due to lost fund-raised or traded income as a direct result of restrictions to counter the spread of COVID-19.

This scheme is funded by Dormant Accounts Funding and so the criteria align with its objective to support:

1. The personal and social development of persons who are economically or socially disadvantaged; or
2. The educational development of persons who are educationally disadvantaged; or
3. Persons with a disability.

Mindful of the difficulties and issues raised by the sector, the Stability Scheme was established to urgently assist organisations at immediate risk of closure. The application process for the Stability Scheme was designed to avoid placing unnecessary or onerous administrative burdens on the applicant organisations. This was to ensure swift turnaround times to facilitate draw down of funds by eligible applicants so that they may continue to provide critical services to those most in need in our communities across Ireland.

The application deadline was extended by one day in order to facilitate those organisations that had technical issues or required clarification on their eligibility. The application process closed at 8pm on Thursday 21st May 2020. The Fund has received over 1,000 applications and the assessment and approval process is currently underway.

Questions - Written Answers

The most common sectors identified in applications are Social services and supports to disadvantaged individuals and communities; Health and Well-being Services and Services for Older Persons. Applications are now being assessed to fully determine eligibility. Organisations approved for funding from the Stability Fund will be informed in the coming weeks.

The eligibility criteria for the Fund was set out clearly on the website of Pobal, which is administering the Scheme on my Department's behalf. As applications for the scheme are now closed, the question of broadening the criteria does not arise.

Covid-19 Pandemic

901. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if he will introduce a special grant scheme for community and voluntary organisations that are members of the PPN nationwide in view of the Covid-19 crisis and the considerable financial loss they have experienced. [7842/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): The Government is aware of the challenges facing community and voluntary organisations many of whom are members of Public Participation Networks all over the country. We are committed to working closely with the sector in managing through these, recognising that it will require a whole of Government approach.

The Community and Voluntary Sector Covid-19 Stability Fund is intended to be a targeted once-off cash injection for organisations and groups, many of which may be members of Public Participation Networks, which are currently delivering critical front-line services to those most in need in our society and are in danger of imminent closure due to lost fund-raised or traded income as a direct result of restrictions to counter the spread of COVID-19.

This scheme is funded by Dormant Accounts Funding and so the criteria align with its objective to support:

1. The personal and social development of persons who are economically or socially disadvantaged; or
2. The educational development of persons who are educationally disadvantaged; or
3. Persons with a disability.

Mindful of the difficulties and issues raised by the sector, the Stability Scheme was established to urgently assist organisations at immediate risk of closure. The application process for the Stability Scheme was designed to avoid placing unnecessary or onerous administrative burdens on the applicant organisations. This was to ensure swift turnaround times to facilitate draw down of funds by eligible applicants so that they may continue to provide critical services to those most in need in our communities across Ireland.

The application deadline was extended by one day in order to facilitate those organisations that had technical issues or required clarification on their eligibility. The application process closed at 8pm on Thursday 21st May 2020. The Scheme has received over 1,000 applications and the assessment and approval process is currently underway. Organisations approved for funding from the Stability Fund will be informed in the coming weeks.

Covid-19 Pandemic

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902. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if the €35 million Covid-19 stability fund for the charity and voluntary sector is up and running; the number of applications there has been to the fund; the number of applications accepted; the amount paid out of the fund; the number of organisations that have received funding to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8010/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): The Community and Voluntary Sector Covid-19 Stability Fund is intended to be a targeted once-off cash injection for organisations and groups currently delivering critical front-line services to those most in need in our society and in danger of imminent closure due to lost fund-raised or traded income as a direct result of restrictions to counter the spread of COVID-19.

This scheme is funded by Dormant Accounts Funding and so the criteria align with its objective to support:

1. The personal and social development of persons who are economically or socially disadvantaged; or
2. The educational development of persons who are educationally disadvantaged; or
3. Persons with a disability.

Mindful of the difficulties and issues raised by the sector, the Stability Scheme was established to urgently assist organisations at immediate risk of closure. The application process for the Stability Scheme was designed to avoid placing unnecessary or onerous administrative burdens on the applicant organisations. This was to ensure swift turnaround times to facilitate draw down of funds by eligible applicants so that they may continue to provide critical services to those most in need in our communities across Ireland.

The application deadline was extended by one day in order to facilitate those organisations that had technical issues or required clarification on their eligibility. The application process closed at 8pm on Thursday 21st May 2020. The Scheme has received over 1,000 applications and the assessment and approval process is currently underway. Organisations approved for funding from the Stability Fund will be informed in the coming weeks.

Covid-19 Pandemic

903. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if the €5 million Covid-19 philanthropy fund for the charity and voluntary sector is up and running; the number of applications to the fund; the number of applications accepted; the amount paid out of the fund; the number of organisations that have received funding to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8011/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Seán Canney): The Innovate Together Fund was launched on 13th May, 2020 with a call for first round applications to close on 27th May, 2020. Government will provide a contribution of €5m to this Fund, to be matched over time by philanthropic contributions. Funding will come from the Dormant Accounts Fund and will be provided immediately, so that grant making can commence. The Fund will be managed by Social Innovation Fund Ireland (SIFI), overseen by an Advisory Board which will include Departmental officials.

As the Fund is still in the initial stages of operation, the information the Deputy is seeking will not be available until the applications under the first call have been evaluated. This process

is expected to be completed in June.

Initial reports from the Social Innovation Fund Ireland, who are administering the Fund for my Department, indicate a very high level of interest and of potential applications.

Rural Development Programme

904. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the extent to which he has received applications under the various rural development schemes in the past two years by county; the extent of the approvals in the past; his expectations for 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8117/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): My Department implements a suite of measures aimed at providing direct financial support for the development and enhancement of rural areas as part of my Department's Rural Development Investment Programme.

Details of the number of applications received in 2018 and 2019 under the CLÁR Programme, the Town & Village Renewal Scheme, the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund are provided in the tables below. The variation in number of applications received in any given year can reflect the scheme criteria for the year and the timing of calls for proposals.

Applications in respect of the schemes listed below are received directly by my Department. Details in respect of the LEADER Programme are not included as these are received and processed by the Local Action Groups that administer LEADER throughout the country.

Details of the grants approved under each scheme are available by following the relevant links on my Department's website at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy/ac9ee6-action-plan-for-rural-development>. It should be noted that the number of approvals differs from the number of applications received, as these schemes are operated on a competitive basis and are generally oversubscribed.

In relation to the position for 2020, the CLÁR Programme, the Town and Village Renewal Scheme and the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme are being launched this week as a €30 million package of co-ordinated and complementary supports aimed at aiding the economic and social recovery of rural Ireland in response to COVID-19. Details in respect of all of these schemes and the projects eligible to receive funding will be available on the gov.ie website by the end of this week.

Under the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, the second call for Category 2 projects, relating to project development and enabling initiatives, closed on the 28th February 2020. There was an excellent response from across the country and 76 applications were received.

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. On completion of this process, my Department will prepare a report setting out the projects which are recommended for approval. My role will be to consider that report and make final decisions in relation to the allocation of funding.

CLÁR Applications 2018 & 2019

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County/Organisation	2018 Applications Received	2019 Applications Received
Carlow	13	11
Cavan	18	26
Clare	22	19
Cork	29	27
Donegal	26	30
Dublin	0	0
Galway	26	26
Kerry	37	34
Kilkenny	12	13
Laois	16	17
Leitrim	22	30
Limerick	21	17
Longford	19	23
Louth	17	9
Mayo	37	37
Meath	11	7
Monaghan	19	19
Offaly	17	9
Roscommon	19	27
Sligo	20	17
Tipperary	24	20
Waterford	16	18
Westmeath	21	22
Wexford	0	0
Wicklow	16	12
National Organisations	49	24
Total	527	494

Outdoor Recreational Infrastructure Scheme Applications 2018 & 2019

County/Organisation	Applications Received 2018	Applications Received 2019
Carlow	9	5
Cavan	13	10
Clare	15	8
Cork	40	14
Donegal	14	14
Dublin	4	0
Galway	22	12
Kerry	26	14
Kildare	2	1
Kilkenny	11	13
Laois	10	9
Leitrim	14	13
Limerick	20	14

Questions - Written Answers

County/Organisation	Applications Received 2018	Applications Received 2019
Longford	15	12
Louth	8	8
Mayo	16	16
Meath	12	7
Monaghan	17	12
Offaly	12	13
Roscommon	12	8
Sligo	15	14
Tipperary	19	12
Waterford	11	13
Westmeath	15	14
Wexford	18	13
Wicklow	15	15
Inland Fisheries	0	1
NPWS	0	1
Coillte	0	0
Udaras	0	0
Heritage Council	0	0
Total	385	285

Town and Village Renewal Scheme Applications 2018 & 2019

County	Applications Received 2018	Applications Received 2019
Carlow	12	12
Cavan	12	12
Clare	6	12
Cork	12	14
Donegal	12	12
Dublin	11	12
Galway	12	12
Kerry	12	12
Kildare	8	11
Kilkenny	7	12
Laois	12	12
Leitrim	12	12
Limerick	12	12
Longford	12	12
Louth	12	12
Mayo	12	12
Meath	12	12
Monaghan	11	12
Offaly	12	11
Roscommon	9	8
Sligo	12	12

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County	Applications Received 2018	Applications Received 2019
Tipperary	12	12
Waterford	10	12
Westmeath	12	10
Wexford	12	12
Wicklow	12	11
Total	290	305

Rural Regeneration & Development Fund Applications 2018 & 2019

County	Applications Received 2018	Applications Received 2019
Carlow	6	2
Cavan	5	3
Clare	23	6
Cork	66	4
Donegal	12	3
Dublin	1	0
Galway	14	4
Kerry	14	6
Kildare	13	0
Kilkenny	9	3
Laois	5	1
Leitrim	5	2
Limerick	18	5
Longford	3	1
Louth	4	0
Mayo	13	4
Meath	8	3
Monaghan	9	2
Offaly	5	3
Roscommon	5	2
Sligo	5	1
Tipperary	6	4
Waterford	5	2
Westmeath	3	0
Wexford	11	3
Wicklow	3	3
Multiple Locations	9	2
Total	280	69

Covid-19 Pandemic

905. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if the application time for the Pobal Covid-19 stability scheme which opened on 11 May 2020 with a closing date of 20 May 2020 will be extended (details supplied). [8157/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): The Community and Voluntary Sector Covid-19 Stability Fund is intended to be a targeted once-off cash injection for organisations and groups currently delivering critical front-line services to those most in need in our society and in danger of imminent closure due to lost fund-raised or traded income as a direct result of restrictions to counter the spread of COVID-19.

This scheme is funded by Dormant Accounts Funding and so the criteria align with its objective to support:

1. The personal and social development of persons who are economically or socially disadvantaged; or
2. The educational development of persons who are educationally disadvantaged; or
3. Persons with a disability.

Mindful of the difficulties and issues raised by the sector, the Stability Scheme was established to urgently assist organisations at immediate risk of closure. The application process for the Stability Scheme was designed to avoid placing unnecessary or onerous administrative burdens on the applicant organisations. This was to ensure swift turnaround times to facilitate draw down of funds by eligible applicants so that they may continue to provide critical services to those most in need in our communities across Ireland.

The application deadline was extended by one day in order to facilitate those organisations that had technical issues or required clarification on their eligibility. The application process closed at 8pm on Thursday 21st May 2020. The Scheme has received over 1,000 applications and the assessment and approval process is currently underway. Organisations approved for funding from the Stability Fund will be informed in the coming weeks.

Departmental Funding

906. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if he will review an application for funding from a project (details supplied) with a view to granting the project financial support. [8239/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Michael Ring): I can confirm that an application was submitted by the organisation in question under the Small Capital Grants Scheme for Social Enterprises which I launched in September 2019.

The scheme, which is administered by the Local Development Companies on behalf of my Department, provides grants of between €2,000 and €15,000 for equipment, repairs or refurbishments to enable social enterprises to improve their service delivery.

My Department received an overwhelming response to this call for funding, which was heavily over-subscribed.

On 9 December 2019, I announced the allocation of €1 million in funding from the Dormant Accounts Fund to 124 social enterprise projects across the country under the scheme. While the organisation referred to by the Deputy was not successful on that occasion, it was successful in the second round of allocations under the scheme which I announced in January 2020. This second round of approvals provided an additional €1 million to a further 106 social enterprises.

Full lists of the successful social enterprises under the first and second rounds of the scheme, including the grant amounts awarded, are available at:

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<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/a99ff0-small-capital-grants-for-social-enterprises/> (first round)

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/045094-small-grants-for-social-enterprises/> (second round)

Domestic Violence Services

907. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection further to a response during Leaders' Questions on 30 April 2020, 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. [7048/20]

912. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a short-term emergency rent type supplement will be put in place 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. [7154/20]

913. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if 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 will be progressed arising from a statement to Dáil Éireann on 30 April 2020. [7155/20]

914. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her views on the fact that women and children fleeing domestic violence are homeless (details supplied). [7423/20]

920. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will provide a short-term emergency rent supplement for women and children who are forced to relocate due to domestic violence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7934/20]

921. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if relevant Departments will be directed to urgently provide for a short-term emergency rent supplement for women and children who are forced to relocate due to domestic violence. [7935/20]

924. **Deputy Holly Cairns** 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 as the Minister with responsibility for the coordination of the emergency Covid-19 response to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence [8206/20]

931. **Deputy Sean Fleming** 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. [7151/20]

Questions - Written Answers

965. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will reconsider allowing access to emergency rent supplement to those in need of immediate relocation as a result of domestic violence (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7691/20]

986. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if her Department will provide emergency rent supplement to women and children who are forced to relocate due to domestic violence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7931/20]

1015. **Deputy Holly Cairns** 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. [8202/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 907, 912 to 914, inclusive, 920, 921, 924, 931, 965, 986 and 1015 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.

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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.

As I have already indicated, I support the call for additional supports to be made available to victims of domestic violence during the current pandemic. Officials from my Department are engaging with SAFE Ireland representatives to explore their proposal and discussions are ongoing to ensure that appropriate supports are provided to victims of domestic violence to access short term emergency accommodation during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Following an initial positive meeting, a follow-up meeting is scheduled for later this week to progress the issue.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputies.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

908. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to assist bereaved families of persons who passed away from Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7134/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): There are a range of supports available from my Department for people following a bereavement.

Under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, the Department may make an exceptional needs payment (ENP) to help meet essential, once-off expenditure which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet from their weekly income. An application can be made under the ENP scheme for assistance with funeral and burial expenses where there is an inability to pay these costs, in part or in full, by the family of the deceased person without causing hardship.

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

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

909. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the school meals programme into the summer holiday months will be extended in order that families that have lost jobs or are temporarily laid off as a result of the public health emergency can continue to access food during these exceptional times; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7146/20]

919. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will consider providing the school meals programme currently distributed to homes

as a result of Covid-19 through the summer months of 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7929/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 909 and 919 together.

The school meals programme provides funding towards the provision of food to some 1,580 schools and organisations benefiting 250,000 children. The objective of the scheme is to provide regular, nutritious food to children who are unable, due to lack of good quality food, to take full advantage of the education provided to them. The programme is an important component of policies to encourage school attendance and extra educational achievement and coincides with the school year.

Following the announcement of the closure of schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic, by the Taoiseach on 12th March 2020, schools and organisations participating in the school meals programme expressed concerns about the impact of school closures on pupils who avail of school meals, and that the unavailability of school meals impacts in particular on the most disadvantaged in our society.

My Department confirmed that funding to schools would continue to enable schools provide food until the end of the current school year - the end of May for post-primary schools and the end of June for primary schools, in line with the parameters of the school meals scheme.

Any proposals to extend funding for food provision beyond these dates would need to be considered in the overall budgetary context.

Covid-19 Pandemic

910. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the legal and regulatory arrangement in force during the period of the Covid-19 crisis regarding redundancy; the legal and regulatory arrangement to come into force when the Covid-19 crisis comes to an end; and the criteria which will be used to determine when the Covid-19 crisis will end with regard to employment law and redundancy provisions. [7152/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Redundancy Payments Act 1967 remains in force during the emergency period, apart from one section which is temporarily suspended in certain circumstances.

The provisions of Section 12 of the Act which relates to temporary lay-offs and short-time work were not considered adequate to deal with the current emergency situation. The provisions of Section 12 provide that an employee who has been temporarily laid-off or kept on short-time for four consecutive weeks, or for a series of six weeks within a thirteen week period of which not more than three are consecutive has an entitlement to claim redundancy from their employer.

As a result of Covid-19, there have been immediate and unprecedented volumes of temporary lay-offs and short-time work and there is a very real potential for these situations to become protracted. Under the existing provisions these lay-off and short-time situations could result in a large number of redundancies in a very short period of time. Employers are obliged to pay redundancy entitlements to employees who have been temporarily laid off after the periods of time currently provided for in Section 12.

In the current emergency situation the existing timelines set out in Section 12 of the Act

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would have serious unintended and detrimental financial impacts on businesses and employees over a short period of time. Significant numbers of redundancies over a short period of time would have an adverse impact on the potential for a business to recover, which in turn would create many insolvency and bankruptcy situations. This will only exacerbate the risk of further job losses. Measures to assist the ongoing attachment between employees and their employer during the crisis is important.

For these reasons emergency legislation has been enacted by way of Section 29 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 to mitigate against the risks to businesses outlined above and to protect for as long as possible the attachment to employment for employees.

The existing provisions of Section 12 have effectively been suspended during the emergency period, from 13th March 2020 to 31st May 2020, in respect of an employee who has been laid off or kept on short time due to the effects of measures required to be taken by the employer in order to comply with, or as a consequence of, Government policy to prevent, limit, minimise or slow the spread of infection of Covid-19. The possibility of extending the end date of the emergency period is provided for in legislation and an extension is currently being considered.

In considering whether the end date will be extended, the Government will have regard to the principles which are set out in Section 29 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 and in particular the need to mitigate against the increased risk of insolvencies in the event of mass redundancies over a short period of time resulting in permanent job losses. The Government will also have regard to the Roadmap for re-opening Society and Business.

It is important to note that an employees' right to claim redundancy after a temporary period of lay off or short-time work has not been removed, rather it has been deferred for a temporary period in this emergency situation. This emergency measure does not impact on the rights of employees who are laid off in ordinary circumstances. All other provisions of the Redundancy Payments Act 1967 Act remain in force.

Covid-19 Pandemic

911. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the provisions she will introduce to ensure that financially viable and profitable companies will be prevented from reducing their workforce or changing the terms and conditions of persons that were employees of such companies prior to the Covid-19 crisis when such companies return to normal operations at the end of the Covid-19 crisis. [7153/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Terms of Employment (Information) Act 1994 provides that an employer must provide its employee with a written statement of the particulars of the employee's terms of employment. It also provides that an employer must notify the employee of any changes in the particulars given in the statement. The Act provides a right of complaint to the Workplace Relations Commission where an employer fails to comply with either of the above.

While an employer may renegotiate the terms and conditions of the contract of employment with an employee, it may not reduce any term of condition to a level lower than statutory entitlement. It is best practice that any such renegotiation should be undertaken in consultation with the affected employee, and taking a long-term view of the employment relationship.

Where an individual is made redundant under the Unfair Dismissals Act 1977, they can

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refer a complaint to the Workplace Relations Commission should they feel they have been unfairly selected for redundancy. An adjudicator will review the case-specific facts surrounding the redundancy before arriving at their decision.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

Questions Nos. 912 to 914, inclusive, answered with Question No. 907.

Free Travel Scheme

915. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will provide the details of road passenger transport operators that received payments in respect of the acceptance of the free travel pass on their bus services; and the list of routes for which these operators received payment for 2019. [7432/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Free Travel scheme provides free travel on most CIÉ public transport services, Luas and a range of services offered by some 80 private operators in various parts of the country. There are currently 975,508 customers in receipt of Free Travel as of the end of April 2020.

The 2020 budget allocation for the Free Travel scheme is €95 million.

Attached as requested is a list of all road transport operators and routes in the Free Travel scheme.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Maternity Benefit

916. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding maternity benefit [7587/20]

927. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if consideration has been given to a temporary extension of the duration of maternity benefit for persons in receipt of the payment; her views on the difficult position for mothers whose payment is due to expire soon; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7101/20]

964. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to increase the maternity benefit payment to €350 in line with the pandemic unemployment payment for new mothers who have been impacted by Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7689/20]

982. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to matters in relation to new mothers (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7852/20]

1008. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the estimated cost of extending maternity leave to all women currently on leave or who were on leave prior to the passing of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 for three months or until that legislation is revoked [8122/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 916, 927, 964, 982 and 1008 together.

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Maternity benefit is a payment made for 26 weeks to employed and self-employed women who are on maternity leave and who satisfy certain pay related social insurance (PRSI) contribution conditions.

Expectant mothers in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment will not be adversely affected by the Covid situation. They can make their maternity application in line with the original expected start date of at least 2 weeks before the week in which the baby is due. The person should close their Pandemic Unemployment Payment and move onto Maternity Benefit as planned. A woman in this situation will then receive her full 26 week maternity benefit payment.

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection also provides income support for women who have lost their employment and are unable to return to work at the end of their maternity leave, in the form of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment. Women concerned are eligible for this payment from the date when they were due to return to their employment after their maternity leave if they have lost their employment as a consequence of the pandemic.

Women 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, Parent's Leave together with Parent's Benefit, for each parent where a baby was born after 1st November 2019 or unpaid Parental Leave.

A decision to extend the period of maternity leave for employees would have to be implemented by the Minister for Justice and Equality who has policy and legal responsibility for this area. In 2020 it is estimated that the Department will spend in excess of €270 million on maternity benefit in respect of an average of 21,000 recipients per week. Each additional week of maternity benefit, based on current recipient levels, would cost €10.3m increasing to €134 million for a 3 month period. It should also be noted that there are additional significant costs to the Exchequer as these estimates do not include the costs of salary top-ups and substitution in the public sector.

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 annual cost on increasing maternity benefit to €350 would be an addition approx. €115m. Decisions around the extension of this benefit would have to be considered in the overall budgetary context.

I trust that this clarifies the matter.

Covid-19 Pandemic

917. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she has considered strengthening Covid-19 emergency legislation in order that an employer

will not be allowed to make an employee redundant during the emergency (details supplied).
[7626/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Firstly, I would like to say that my thoughts are with all workers who are dealing with job losses or facing the prospect of redundancies at this difficult time. I want to assure everybody that my Department is assisting 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 and will continue to do so.

An all-of-Government approach has been taken to financially support workers and businesses alike during the emergency period. In addition to the existing range of social welfare support schemes, the Government has put in place the 'National COVID-19 Income Support Scheme'.

This includes-

- the temporary wage subsidy scheme to help affected companies keep paying their employees, maintain the employment relationship and keep businesses viable in order to prevent redundancies;

- the emergency Pandemic Unemployment Payment for both employed and self-employed workers who have suffered a collapse in income.

The emergency legislation which was enacted recently effectively suspends the provisions of Section 12 of the Redundancy Payments Act 1967 (as amended) which relate to the rights of an employee to claim a redundancy entitlement from their employer after temporary periods of lay-off and short-time work during the Covid-19 emergency period. This was done to mitigate against the increased risk of insolvencies in the event of mass redundancies over a short period of time, which would only exacerbate the risk of further permanent job losses and redundancies.

In implementing all of the above the Government has already put in place significant measures which are helping to prevent redundancies.

The proposal to withdraw an employer's right to make workers redundant could have far reaching and significant unintended consequences, including interfering with individual contracts of employment. Furthermore it cannot be said that all employees will want the redundancy provision removed as is suggested. Employees may have significant service with an employer, and as significant stakeholders in a business be aware that the business is struggling and redundancy may be the better option for some of them. Restricting their right to access a redundancy payment and seek new work opportunities or reskilling opportunities is a very real issue for them.

The proposal could also create a risk to an employee's right to a redundancy payment. The State does not have the power to stop a business closing or to prevent liquidations once the provisions of company law are complied with. Unfortunately the closure of the business will happen in some circumstances and this is a very real concern for many businesses right now, including many small businesses endeavouring to stay in business. If the right of the employer to make an employee redundant is taken away this could jeopardise an employee's right to compensation by way of a redundancy payment while the liquidation of that company is underway.

It is also important to bear in mind why redundancy provisions are used. If a business is in trading and in financial difficulties very often one of the mechanisms used to save that business (which in turn saves some jobs) is redundancy. An employer may downsize their business and reduce their workforce by way of redundancies in order to continue to be viable. If the right of the employer to make employees redundant is removed it could result in more permanent job

losses.

Employers have to make decisions on the ongoing viability of their firms in real time and having regard to real circumstances – particularly in circumstances where revenues have collapsed for many firms. Directors of firms have, under company law provisions, very serious and personal responsibilities to ensure that they can continue to trade and not trade whilst insolvent.

Finally and this is important for employees who may be in a position to negotiate a redundancy package with the many genuine employers in our economy - if a company is restricted from making employees redundant and has to retain them on payroll, the assets of that company will dissipate and mean that any negotiated redundancy package has less chance of success.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

918. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if Covid-19 payments will be extended to specific industries in relation to the time-frame in which they are permitted to return to work, that is, the live events industry which was the first to close down and will be the last to reopen; if it will be ensured that if the Covid-19 payments become industry specific that the event industry is given recognition for being one of the last industries to return to work in view of the fact it is vital to ensure skill retention in the industry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7652/20]

935. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will extend the pandemic unemployment payment; and if so, the length of time the payment will be extended for and the rates for same. [7333/20]

942. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the date the pandemic unemployment payment is due to cease in June 2020; her plans to extend the payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7382/20]

949. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to modify the short-term work support scheme during the reopening phase; her further plans to increase the rate of the scheme in line with the pandemic unemployment payment of €350; her plans to tailor the scheme in line with the need of specific sectors; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7482/20]

971. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to extend the pandemic unemployment payment until August 2020 for persons that are not due to return to work until phase 5 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. [7759/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 918, 935, 942, 949 and 971 together.

The COVID-19 unemployment payment was introduced as a time limited emergency measure to meet the surge in unemployment which resulted from the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic and the final payment is due to be made on 9th June 2020.

As we gradually move through the phases of reopening our society, we need to now review the nature of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and how it fits into cross-Government plans to keep Ireland healthy and get the country working again. Any future decisions will be based on our commitment that everyone who needs help will get the most appropriate as-

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sistance and also based on the evidence we receive from the reopening of the economy. Arrangements for supports beyond that date will be considered by Government as part of its broad based approach to management of the emergency across all sectors of the economy and society.

I trust this clarifies the position at this time.

Question No. 919 answered with Question No. 909.

Questions Nos. 920 and 921 answered with Question No. 907.

Covid-19 Pandemic

922. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if there will be legal implications arising from fathers not being able to be added to the birth certificate of their children online in view of the fact they cannot register a birth personally due to Covid-19 restrictions; her plans to allow fathers to register online; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7955/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): My Department introduced new measures in the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 to ensure that births could continue to be registered during the Covid-19 Pandemic. These measures removed the necessity for a qualified informant (QI) to sign the register of births and to attend before a registrar in order for a birth to be registered.

The QI can use an application form available on the HSE.ie and GOV.ie websites to provide the registration service with the particulars of the birth as required under the Civil Registration Act 2004, as amended. On receipt of these particulars, the birth is entered in the register of births and a birth certificate can subsequently be provided to the parents. The particulars of both parents can be registered via this process.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Employment Rights

923. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if her Department examined proposals aimed at giving a better protection to employees affected by insolvency situations as recommended by a report (details supplied). [8080/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Duffy Cahill report, which was commissioned by the Government in the aftermath of the Clery's closure, highlighted how the issues raised by that event and the subsequent legal cases are highly complex.

The Duffy Cahill report was sent to the Company Law Review Group (CLRG) in 2016 for its consideration as part of the work of that group in advising the Minister for Business Enterprise and Innovation on any changes that it considered necessary with respect to the protection of employees and unsecured creditors. (The CLRG is a statutory body comprising members drawn from regulatory, legal, business and employee interests).

The CLRG as part of its deliberations also considered related amendments proposed by Deputy Nash (then Senator Nash) to the Companies (Accounting) Bill in April/May 2017.

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The CLRG's report on the Protection of Employees and Unsecured Creditors was presented to the Minister for Business Enterprise and Innovation in June 2017 and published on the website of the CLRG. It did not include the implementation of the Duffy/Cahill report or the Senator Nash proposals in its recommendations.

It is clear that the implementation of the recommendations in the Duffy Cahill report give rise to a host of complex issues and that any proposal to progress them would require further careful consideration involving consultation with many stakeholders.

This may be a matter that the incoming Government will seek to progress.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 924 answered with Question No. 907.

Covid-19 Pandemic

925. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to challenges being experienced by couples attending the public registry offices for marriages due to social distancing and other restrictions during the Covid-19 crisis; and if other new proposals are being considered to facilitate these unions. [8253/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I am advised that no civil marriage ceremonies are being conducted due to the nationwide closure of civil registration offices and that this is adversely affecting couples seeking to marry. The only exceptions to this are cases involving marriages where one of the parties is at threat of death. Such marriages can be conducted with the prior approval of a superintendent registrar, on a case by case basis.

Couples wishing to marry at a future date, when restrictions have eased, can still submit their notification of intention to marry by postal service and do not need to attend at a local civil registration office in person.

The Health Service Executive (HSE) has responsibility for the conduct of civil marriages and for the marriage notification process. I understand that couples have been contacted and advised of the arrangements that are in place where a marriage was planned over the course of the coming weeks.

As restrictions ease, in line with the Roadmap for Re-opening Society and Business, couples will be advised of the steps to take in arranging a new date for their marriage and for the completion of the legal preliminaries.

The General Register Office, which operates under the aegis of my Department, is liaising with counterparts in the HSE with a view to putting in place local arrangements for the resumption of registration services, in line with the public health guidance.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

926. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the provisions in place or which will be put into place to continue the pandemic unemploy-

ment payment for those workers currently in receipt of same but that will not be able to return to work if their employer reopens prior to the availability of childcare due to crèches and schools remaining closed. [7061/20]

943. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the changes she plans to make to the Covid-19 payment; if she is considering changes for those returning to work following maternity leave; if she is considering changes for those that have underlying health conditions in which their workplace is open; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7396/20]

966. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a person that is immunosuppressed and is unable to work in view of the fact they are more susceptible to contracting Covid-19 is entitled to apply for the pandemic unemployment payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7704/20]

984. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the options available to employees that are expected to return to work in cases in which the work cannot be done from home and they cannot access childcare due the fact crèches are closed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7898/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 926, 943, 966 and 984 together.

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. If a person has lost their employment and the employer is no longer paying the persons's wages, they may qualify for the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

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 regarding the COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment, including eligibility, will be taken having regard to a range of factors including how the public health situation evolves which is being carefully monitored.

The Government has asked employers to be flexible in so far as possible to allow staff time off to look after their children or other members of the family which could include offering compassionate leave, working from home, altering shifts so that someone is available to be at home when a parent is working, rearranging holidays or allowing paid time off which can be worked back at a later time.

Where parents have to continue to work and they are unable to make appropriate compassionate leave arrangements, employees may access some statutory entitlements which include 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.

If a person is immune suppressed and is unable to work in view of the fact that they are more susceptible to contracting the COVID-19 virus they may apply for illness benefit which is paid at a maximum weekly personal rate of €203 and increases may also be paid for qualifying adults and children. To apply for this support a person should submit completed illness benefit claim form online or by post together with a medical certificate from their General Practitioner.

Where a person, in any of the circumstances outlined by the Deputies, is experiencing financial hardship they can apply for financial support under the supplementary welfare allowance

scheme.

I trust that this clarifies the matter.

Question No. 927 answered with Question No. 916.

Legislative Measures

928. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when sections 19, 24, 25 and 26 of the Social Welfare, Pensions and Civil Registration Act 2018 will come into effect; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7129/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The reports referred to in sections 24, 25 and 26 of the Social Welfare, Pension and Civil Registration Act 2018 were submitted to the Chair of the Joint Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection in August 2019 for circulation to the committee. My office will forward these to you for information.

In relation to Section 19, my Department has met with numerous interested stakeholders to hear their views on how indexation might apply to social welfare rates. This was an issue that was also discussed at the Pre-Budget Forum in July 2019 as well as at bilateral meetings with stakeholders.

My Department has considered the results of the consultation process and, in conjunction with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, is developing options to implement the commitment in the Roadmap for Pensions Reform to examine and develop proposals to institute a process whereby future changes in pension rates of payment are explicitly linked to changes in consumer prices and average wages.

Public Services Card

929. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of the public services card in addition to the action of the Data Protection Commissioner on same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7137/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): On 6th December 2019, my Department received enforcement proceedings from the DPC in respect of the August 2019 Report of the Commission on the Public Services Card.

The Department filed an appeal against the Enforcement Notice within the timeframe provided to do so.

As the matter is now before the Courts, it would be inappropriate to make any further comment.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Community Employment Schemes

930. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of the interdepartmental review into community employment schemes; and if she

will make a statement on the matter. [7138/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): In early 2019, the Government agreed to establish an Interdepartmental Group (IDG) to explore how social inclusion schemes might be organised going forward.

A series of meetings of the IDG have taken place and a number of follow-up meetings were undertaken with the relevant Departments. There was also a stakeholder consultation process which resulted in a number of submissions that were included in the wider review.

The final Interdepartmental Group report is currently with my Department for consideration and will be submitted to Government in due course.

The priority for my Department is to ensure that all employment and activation programmes have the best outcomes for participants. The Government is very mindful of the large number of work programme places involved in service delivery and other valuable services to individuals and communities across Ireland.

Question No. 931 answered with Question No. 907.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

932. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if employees (details supplied) qualify for the pandemic unemployment payment in view of the fact they are being forced to reduce their working hours as a direct result of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7198/20]

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 which resulted from the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic. This emergency payment is payable to people of working age between 18 and up to 66 years old, who were in employment immediately prior to the 13th March 2020 and have lost their employment and their income due to the impact of the pandemic. If these conditions are satisfied, the COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment is payable.

Where an employee has had their hours of work reduced and is unemployed for 4 days or more in a week they can apply for the social-insurance based jobseekers benefit. If they have been put on a short time working week on a temporary basis due to a reduction in business for any reason, including the effects of the COVID 19 pandemic, they can apply for short time work support. If they do not qualify for these social insurance supports they may be eligible for the means tested jobseekers allowance scheme. Further details on the supports available are provided on www.gov.ie.

I trust that this clarifies the matter.

Redundancy Payments

933. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the supports available to help workers (details supplied) in south western areas of Dublin that are facing redundancy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7201/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty):

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Firstly, I would like to say that my thoughts are with all Debenhams workers who are dealing with job losses at this difficult time. As deputies are well aware, with the exception of grocery outlets, the retail sector has been particularly affected by the economic turmoil caused by Covid-19. Having come through a number of turbulent years and an examinership process, it is regrettable that the Debenhams workers now face redundancy.

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.

Specifically, in relation to income supports, the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was available to the employees when they were initially temporarily laid off and continues to be paid to them while the emergency payment is in operation. In some cases, where it was more advantageous, employees will have been awarded a Jobseeker's Benefit or Jobseeker's Allowance payment depending on their family composition and circumstances.

In addition to the immediate income supports the Dublin Mid Leinster Division of my Department organised and hosted an online information session on 15/5/2020 for Debenhams employees. The purpose of this online session was to give support to the employees during this difficult time and to provide reassurance that there is a variety of organisations and services available to them to with the ultimate aim of supporting them back to employment. The supports and advice outlined included initial income supports, job searching, training/education options, help with CVs and/or interview preparation as well as advice on self-employment and personal finances.

Information was presented by representatives of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, the Education and Training Boards, Jobs Clubs, the Local Enterprise Office and the Money Advice and Budgeting Service.

An invitation to the online information session was facilitated to employees through the Mandate Trade Union and Debenhams. Approximately 230 employees viewed the information session. Follow up information and contact details are currently being issued to any employees seeking further information or support on the options outlined.

With regard to redundancy supports, 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 is engaging with the liquidator with a view to progressing these redundancy applications.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

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Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

934. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the steps she is taking to provide supports for those returning here from working abroad due to the Covid-19 pandemic due to the fact that they may have lost their job abroad or need to take care of sick relatives; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7269/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment has been introduced as an emergency measure so that payments can be made as quickly as possible to the large number of people in the state who have become fully unemployed due to the pandemic. The payment is not available to people living abroad and who have returned to Ireland as outlined by the Deputy. 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 is experiencing financial hardship they can apply for financial support through the supplementary welfare allowance scheme.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 935 answered with Question No. 918.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

936. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if proposals are being examined to establish a Covid-19 household debt resolution process to help families that may accumulate debt during this period. [7334/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The negative economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis is likely to be severe and will require our personal insolvency system to be as robust and efficient as possible. The State has a comprehensive insolvency system and a network of experienced insolvency practitioners in place to quickly advise those people who may inevitably find themselves in financial difficulty.

Debt resolution is one of the services that the Insolvency Service of Ireland (ISI) provides. The ISI was established in 2013 to deal with personal insolvency and is under the remit of the Department of Justice and Equality. The ISI aims to return people to solvency and full participation in social and economic activity. It offers a range of debt solutions, including a regulated network of qualified professionals, that can help a person to reach a permanent debt solution with their creditor(s).

The ISI encourages anyone with serious debt issues, including those impacted by the Covid-19 crisis to visit its dedicated website backontrack.ie.

The Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS), under the aegis of the Citizens Information Board, provides 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, confidential and independent service, MABS also provides help and advice to those in mortgage arrears.

During the COVID 19 pandemic, MABS continues to offer money and debt advice service, including the Dedicated Mortgage Arrears service, to existing and new clients who may need assistance in dealing with household debt accumulated during this period.

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MABS is providing its services by phone, email, post and by videoconferencing where face to face engagement is necessary. The MABS Helpline is open Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm on 0761 07 2000.

A Covid-19 live feed has been created on the MABS website to host important financial developments and how they may affect the public. A new call back and instant messaging service is also now available on the MABS.ie website where the public can request a call back from a MABS advisor.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

International Students

937. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the PPSN applications of international students that have recently arrived here will be expedited (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7341/20]

999. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the PPSN applications of international students that have recently arrived here will be expedited in view of the fact that many cases are being refused despite providing valid reasons for applying for a PPSN and in further view of the fact that successful applications are in some cases taking over a month to process; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8038/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 937 and 999 together.

My Department has temporarily suspended the face-to-face SAFE/PPSN registration service. This decision was taken in order to comply with HSE and WHO guidelines in respect of social distancing.

As a result of the postponement of the SAFE process, an email and postal service has now been introduced for people who wish to apply for a PPSN.

Email applications can be submitted to ppsn@welfare.ie and postal applications to the Department's office in Shannon Lodge, Carrick-on-Shannon, Co. Leitrim. Staff in that office are currently processing these PPSN applications until such time as the face-to-face process is reinstated.

People who apply for a PPSN are required to provide evidence of their identity, proof of their address and evidence that they require a PPSN to avail of public services in the State. Difficulties in providing such evidence can delay the PPSN application process.

Arrangements are in place for the prioritisation of an application for a PPSN where a person requires one to receive support under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme operated by my Department.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

International Students

938. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social

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Protection her plans to implement a specific emergency social protection payment for international students that are not eligible for the pandemic unemployment payment and do not have a PPSN or are not currently able to find work (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7342/20]

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 exceptional needs payments (ENPs) and urgent needs payments (UNPs).

Payments can be made to help with the cost of any exceptional needs and urgent needs which a person cannot reasonably be expected to meet from their income. The habitual residence condition does not apply to ENPs and UNPs. Decisions on such payments are made 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.

International students who are not eligible for other Department schemes can receive support under the ENP and UNP schemes. This support can include financial assistance to meet the cost of food and other essential items needed to prevent hardship. If the Deputy is aware of specific cases where difficulties have arisen, then she should bring these to the attention of the Department.

It is necessary to have a PPS number in order to access the Department's payments. As part of the response to the Covid 19 pandemic, the Department has introduced a simplified postal PPSN registration process. Information is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/12e6de-get-a-personal-public-service-pps-number/>

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Appeals

939. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when an appeal by a person (details supplied) in respect of a pension will be finalised; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7354/20]

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 20 September 2019. I am advised that the case was referred to an Appeals Officer on 20 February 2020.

I am further advised that Appeals Officer has been in communication with the person concerned and has been provided with some updated information in relation to the case. The person concerned anticipates having some additional documentary medical evidence in the near future and has undertaken to provide that when available. On receipt of that additional evidence the Appeals Officer will make their decision.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

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I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Appeals

940. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of cases yet to be dealt with by the appeals office; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7355/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): 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.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that, as of 1 May 2020, the total number of social welfare appeals on hand was 7,590. This covers appeals at all stage of the process, including those awaiting the submission from the Department's Deciding Officer on the appeal contentions and those that have been assigned to an Appeals Officer for consideration and decision. The equivalent figure at the end of 2019 was 8,788.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Appeals

941. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of cases that can be dealt with by the appeals office based on documentary evidence presented; the plans in place to deal with same urgently in view of the fact they are not expected to require further medical evidence or an oral hearing; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7357/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): 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.

The number of appeals on hand in the Social Welfare Appeals Office, as of 1 May 2020, was 7,590. The corresponding figure for the end of 2019 was 8,788.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that as a result of the current Covid-19 restrictions and in order to safeguard the health and safety of both appellants and staff the Office has not held any oral appeal hearings since 16 March 2020. The Social Welfare Appeals Office sincerely regrets any inconvenience caused by these essential measures. The matter is being kept under review.

Every effort is being made to progress appeals on hand. Appeals are currently being determined on a summary basis. It may be possible for Appeals Officers to gather additional information or seek clarifications on any matter relating to an appeal (for example by telephone or email) which might otherwise have been ascertained in the course of an oral hearing.

This year has seen a significant increase in the number of appeals being finalised. 8,965 appeals were finalised in the period January-April 2020 compared to 6,788 in the corresponding period for 2019.

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The average appeal processing time for the year 2019 was 23.8 weeks. There has been some improvement to date in 2020 as the average appeal processing time for the period January to April was 20.7 weeks.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 942 answered with Question No. 918.

Question No. 943 answered with Question No. 926.

Child Benefit

944. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if consideration will be given to extending the eligibility for the child benefit scheme to persons over 18 years of age that will be in full-time education in September 2020 due to the disruption of the academic year due to Covid-19 (details supplied). [7421/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Child benefit is a monthly payment made to families with children in respect of all qualified children up to the age of 16 years. The payment continues to be paid in respect of children until their 18th birthday who are in full-time education, or who have a disability. Child benefit is currently paid, as of end-March 2019, to over 638,160 families in respect of over 1.2 million children with an estimated expenditure of more than €2 billion in 2019.

Extending the payment in respect of full time students in second level education who are over 18 years of age would have significant cost implications and would have to be considered in an overall budgetary context.

My Department, in line with the overall Government response to this public health emergency, moved swiftly to put in place enhanced and new supports for existing customers and new customers who, as a result of COVID-19, are working reduced hours or who have lost their employment entirely – even if on a temporary basis.

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

- Increase for a Qualified Child (IQCs) paid with primary social welfare payments;
- the Working Family Payment for low-paid employees with children;
- the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance.

These schemes provide targeted assistance that is directly linked to household income and thereby support low-income families with older children participating in full-time education.

Covid-19 Pandemic

945. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if guidelines have been developed in relation to the temporary lay-offs due to Covid-19; if there is a time limit on the length of time for temporary lay-offs; and if guidance is being developed for employers and employees on exiting the temporary lay-off situation. [7427/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The

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existing provisions of the Redundancy Payments Act 1967 (as amended) outline the obligations and rights of employers and employees in situations of temporary lay-offs for the purposes of redundancy entitlements.

An employee is considered to have been laid off where the employment ceases because their employer is unable to provide them with work, it is reasonable for the employer to believe the cessation is temporary and the employer gives the employee prior notice to that effect.

The provisions of Section 12 of the Act provide that an employee who has been temporarily laid-off or kept on short-time for four consecutive weeks, or for a series of six weeks within a thirteen week period of which not more than three are consecutive has an entitlement to claim redundancy from their employer.

These provisions were not considered adequate to deal with the current emergency situation. As a result of Covid-19, there have been immediate and unprecedented volumes of temporary lay-offs and short-time work and there is a very real potential for these situations to become protracted. Under the existing provisions these lay-off and short-time situations could result in a large number of redundancies in a very short period of time. Employers are obliged to pay redundancy entitlements to employees who have been temporarily laid off after the periods of time currently provided for in Section 12.

In the current emergency situation the existing timelines set out in Section 12 of the Act would have serious unintended and detrimental financial impacts on businesses and employees over a short period of time. Significant numbers of redundancies over a short period of time would have an adverse impact on the potential for a business to recover, which in turn would create many insolvency and bankruptcy situations. This will only exacerbate the risk of further job losses. Measures to assist the ongoing attachment between employees and their employer during the crisis is important.

For these reasons emergency legislation has been enacted by way of Section 29 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 to mitigate against the risks to businesses outlined above and to protect for as long as possible the attachment to employment for employees.

The existing provisions of Section 12 have effectively been suspended during the emergency period, from 13th March 2020 to 31st May 2020, in respect of an employee who has been laid off or kept on short time due to the effects of measures required to be taken by the employer in order to comply with, or as a consequence of, Government policy to prevent, limit, minimise or slow the spread of infection of Covid-19.

The extension of the end date of the emergency period is provided for in legislation and an extension is currently being considered. In considering whether the end date will be extended, the Government will have regard to the principles which are set out in Section 29 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 and in particular the need to mitigate against the increased risk of insolvencies in the event of mass redundancies over a short period of time resulting in permanent job losses. The government will also have regard to the timelines set out in the Roadmap to re-open Society and Business.

It is important to note that an employees' right to claim redundancy after a temporary period of lay off or short-time work has not been removed, rather it has been deferred for a temporary period in this emergency situation.

There are no specific guidelines in relation to exiting temporary lay-off situations, however employers are expected to keep up to date contact details of their employees in order to advise

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them of their date of return to work or the continuation of the lay-off. The Workplace Relations Commission's Customer Service Section can provide further information in relation to the rights and obligations of employees and employers respectively under employment rights legislation and can be contacted on 1890 80 80 90.

Disability Allowance

946. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason a person (details supplied) in County Kildare has had their award of disability allowance reduced; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7468/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): Following a review of the entitlement of this lady, it was found that she had a decrease in her means from her previous assessment. Based on the information provided to my department, a maximum rate of disability allowance (DA) was awarded with effect from 22 January 2020.

A letter issued to this lady informing her of this on 19 May 2020. Arrears of payment due have also issued to the person concerned.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

947. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when a review of the pandemic unemployment payment will be carried out; if the review will consider persons that were working seasonal and part-time work and earning less than €350 per week while simultaneously refusing to pay persons under 18 and over 66 years of age that were working full-time; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7477/20]

958. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the provision that will be made for workers over 70 years of age that are unable to return to work and have not qualified for the pandemic unemployment payment; if the payment will be made available to these workers many of which are finding it difficult to manage on their pension; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7607/20]

980. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to support seasonal workers (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7809/20]

990. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the length of time a person is able to receive jobseeker's benefit will be extended due to the Covid-19 pandemic; if consideration has been given to seasonal workers that are currently on jobseeker's benefit and ordinarily work during the summer tourism season but cannot due to the lack of employment opportunities; if such persons will be able to stay on jobseeker's benefit rather than being means-tested for jobseeker's allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7943/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 947, 958, 980 and 990 together.

The COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced in March 2020 as a

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time-limited emergency measure to meet the surge in unemployment which resulted from the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic. This payment is payable to people of working age between 18 and up to 66 which 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 means-tested non-contributory pension. People over 66 years do not pay social insurance contributions and can retain all of their State Contributory Pension if they lose employment, thus guaranteeing an income support. People in receipt of a reduced rate of non-contributory pension who are also in receipt of an employment income may have their State pension payment increased if they lose that employment income or if it is reduced. Recipients of State pension payments may, if they satisfy the 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 was extended by four weeks.

In relation to seasonal workers, 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. If their entitlement to jobseekers benefit exhausts they can apply for jobseekers allowance which is means tested.

Where a person, of any age, is experiencing financial hardship they can apply for financial support through the means tested supplementary welfare allowance scheme.

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. Phase 1, which saw the re-opening of a very limited range of sectors, commenced on 18 May 2020. As the situation continues to evolve, decisions around the future of the COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment will be taken having regard to a range of factors including how the public health situation evolves and the effects of the re-opening in Phase 1 which are being carefully monitored.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

948. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of a Covid-19 payment for a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7481/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): My Department receives information from Revenue of all customers paid under the Revenue Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS). This file includes a customer's PPSN, customer's wage payment frequency (monthly, fortnightly or weekly paid) and the date of the TWSS payment.

A Covid-19 PUP application will not pay due to Revenue overlap if the date of a customer's last TWSS payment was within a certain period prior to the Covid-19 PUP payment date. This is based on the customer's salary/wage payment frequency.

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My Department is aware that a small number of employers, having initially registered for the TWSS are no longer paying their employees this way. A TWSS registered employee, who is no longer engaged with the TWSS may not receive a Covid-19 payment for a period of time after the last payment run processed by their employer, as the scheme is set up to block the issuing of Covid-19 payments to avoid duplication of payments during a validation period. This period is based on the salary payment frequency of the employee. A person cannot receive a Covid-19 payment and a TWSS payment concurrently.

According to the records of my Department, the person concerned submitted applications for a Covid-19 PUP on 08/04/2020 and 10/04/2020 respectively. These applications were refused as according to Departmental records the employer was registered for TWSS. I am advised that the person concerned submitted a further application for a Covid-19 payment on 28/4/2020 and this was awarded and paid on 5/5/2020 based on the validation period between her last TWSS payment at the end of March and her Covid-19 payment date. However as the person concerned received a payment from her employer at the end of April, subsequent PUP payments failed the validation period of 32 days based on the monthly salary frequency.

As a result of the difficulties encountered with the Covid-19 payment, I am advised that the person concerned received assistance under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme and was awarded Emergency Needs Payments of €350 on 16/04/2020, 23/04/2020, 30/04/2020, 20/05/2020 and 21/05/2020 respectively. A further ENP payment will issue on week commencing 25/05/2020.

As several Covid-19 payments have failed, I am advised that the person concerned will have received correspondence from the Department advising her how to proceed. The person concerned should contact her local Intreo Centre who should be able to assist her in processing her application.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 949 answered with Question No. 918.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

950. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the specific measures she is considering to support those under 25 years of age that have been disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 crisis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7483/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): In these unprecedented times, my Department has put emergency measures in place to meet the surge in unemployment which has affected so many people, including those under 25 years. The COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced as a time-limited, emergency income support measure which is paid at a flat rate of €350 per week to people of working age from 18 and up to 66 years old who were employed immediately before the 13th March and as a result of the pandemic have lost their employment and income.

The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme operated by the Revenue Commissioners provides the payment of support to employers who pay PAYE Income tax in respect of eligible employees where the employer's business has experienced significant disruption due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Enhancements were announced to this scheme which included an increase in the subsidy paid in respect of workers earning less than €24,400 from 70% to 85% and a provision whereby employers can top-up salaries by more than 15% in order to ensure that low paid em-

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ployees, many of whom are aged under 25, will receive €350 per week.

Any arrangements for the continuation or further adjustment of these emergency supports will be considered by Government as part of its broad based approach to management of the emergency across all sectors of the economy and society.

Where a person is not eligible to receive the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment or wage subsidy scheme they can apply for a jobseekers payment. The jobseeker's benefit scheme provides a social insurance contribution-based support for people who have lost work and are unable to find alternative full-time employment. If a person does not meet the qualifying conditions of the scheme or where their benefit exhausts they may be eligible to apply for the means tested jobseeker's allowance scheme.

The maximum weekly personal rate for both the jobseekers schemes is €203. An age related reduced jobseeker's allowance rate of €112.70 generally applies to young jobseekers aged 18-24 to incentivise them to engage in education or training to improve their chances of obtaining full time sustainable employment. If a young jobseeker participates in education or training they can receive the maximum weekly rate of up to €203.

The Youth Employment Support Scheme (YESS) is a work experience placement programme which is specifically targeted at young jobseekers aged 18-24 years of age who are long-term unemployed or who face barriers to employment. This scheme continues to be available despite the current restrictions of movement and arrangements for social distancing. Young jobseekers who participate in this scheme receive a maximum weekly payment of €229.20.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy at this time.

Social Welfare Payments Waiting Times

951. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason there are significant delays in processing applications such as the disability allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7525/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): Disability allowance (DA) is a weekly allowance for people with a disability aged between 16 and 66 with a disability which is expected to last for at least one year and who satisfy the medical condition, means test and are habitually resident in Ireland.

There is no delay with processing Disability allowance claims. The target processing time for DA is to process 75% of new claims within 12 weeks. In April 2020, 88% of applications were completed within the expected timeframe. The average time taken to award a DA claim was 7 weeks.

My department is committed to ensuring that claims are processed as expeditiously as possible. The DA scheme area is continuously monitored and reviewed to ensure applications are processed and customers are responded to as quickly as possible.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

952. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Pro-

tection if a person can be transferred to the pandemic unemployment payment in order to be in a position to pay bills, rent and so on in exceptional circumstances such as in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7543/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): To qualify for a Pandemic Unemployment Payment a person must, inter alia, have been in employment on or after 6th March 2020 and must have lost employment as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

I am advised that the person concerned stated they finished work on 28th February 2020 and so does not satisfy the eligibility criteria for that payment. However, this person is currently in receipt of Jobseekers Allowance.

The local Community Welfare Service will contact with the person as a matter of urgency to discuss whether they can be assisted to meet their financial needs under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance schemes including Rent Allowance.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

953. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she plans to access EU funding relating to the support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency scheme; if so, the amount she anticipates accessing under the scheme; the specific programmes it will be acquired for; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7563/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The SURE instrument was published on 2nd April by the European Commission and is intended primarily to support Member States with efforts to protect workers and jobs, and also support some health-related measures. It is temporary in nature, with the duration and scope limited to tackling the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. It was adopted at ECOFIN, and published in the Official Journal of the European Union on 19 May 2020.

Briefly, the Commission will borrow on financial markets to finance loans to Member States, allowing Member States benefit from the EU's strong credit rating (AAA) and low borrowing costs. Under the proposal, SURE will provide financial assistance to Member States of up to €100bn in total. The loans are targeted to assist Member States to address sudden increases in public expenditure caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to preserve employment (such as short-time work schemes and other similar measures put in place for the self-employed) and certain occupational health expenditure.

Notwithstanding, a number of Member States, including Ireland, have parliamentary processes to be completed before SURE can be activated. In Ireland, while the regulation will have direct effect, primary legislation will be required in order to sign and give effect to the underpinning guarantee agreement. Any decision to access the SURE funds is a matter, in the first instance, for the Minister for Finance.

Covid-19 Pandemic

954. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if her Department has undertaken an analysis to match skills shortages in sectors affected by Covid-19 with those with appropriate or transferable skills that are currently unemployed; if

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not, if such an analysis and subsequent action is planned; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7565/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): It is imperative that those who have lost their jobs during the pandemic receive practical supports to assist them back to work. My Department is advancing a number of significant recruitment initiatives to meet the critical staffing needs of employers who are delivering essential services to our communities. The Employer Relations Team has responded to the need to fill critical vacancies by adapting their recruitment processes to provide tailored responses to deal with the unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19. These initiatives have been advanced in collaboration with State funded training agencies and employer representative organisations.

In the healthcare sector, my Department, in collaboration with Skillnet Ireland and Nursing Homes Ireland, matched 50 qualified healthcare assistants to individual nursing homes. A further 187 people availed of online training via the Healthcare Assistant Induction Programme (HAIP). This training programme is a new employment response to give participants a thorough grounding in the basics of healthcare. It is delivered online over three weeks, via interactive virtual classrooms funded by Skillnet Ireland.

Furthermore, my Department has worked with more than 40 employers in the horticulture sector, particularly those engaged as fruit producers, and has made over 2,400 referrals. This is in addition to jobseekers who have contacted these employers directly as a result of the online Help2Harvest campaign.

Further Education and Training (FET) plays a critical role in the labour market activation response and in upskilling and reskilling those who have been displaced as a result of economic downturn. Building and sustaining skills in the labour force will require a key focus as the labour market recovers, with a particular emphasis on skills which will be in demand.

SOLAS are working in partnership with officials in my Department to develop an agile response which brings together and builds on existing FET expertise and resources to provide the recently unemployed cohort with the 'Skills to Compete' in the labour market. The aim is to maximise an individual's potential for re-entry to sustainable work by developing skills, building digital capabilities and providing specific courses targeting growth sectors and occupations, and linking this to advice and supports tailored to the individual. This initiative complements other resources and structures, such as the Regional Skills Fora, to effectively match individuals and prospective employers. Using local labour market intelligence, responses can be adapted to meet regional needs and challenges.

I have also established a Labour Market Advisory Council (LMAC) which comprises an independent group of industry leaders and labour market experts, having been originally established as the Labour Market Council in 2013. The Advisory Council will provide advice to Government to support labour market and business recovery and is currently developing proposals outlining the required public policy responses that will assist the retraining and re-employment of those who have been disrupted by the pandemic.

Covid-19 Pandemic

955. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the obligation of employers regarding the selection of staff for lay-offs during the Covid-19 lockdown with particular reference to obligations to inform staff of the methods used. [7574/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Dis-

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missal in circumstances where a genuine redundancy situation exists is regarded as one of the fair reasons for dismissal under the Unfair Dismissals Acts 1977 to 2015. However, unfair selection for redundancy is regarded as an unfair dismissal under those Acts.

When selecting a particular employee for redundancy, an employer is required to apply selection criteria which are reasonable and are applied in a fair manner. Employers must follow agreed procedures when making the selection. In instances where there is no agreed procedure in relation to selection for redundancy, the employer must act fairly and reasonably.

Employment equality legislation also prohibits selection for redundancy that is based on any of the following grounds: gender, civil status, family status, age, disability, religious belief, race, sexual orientation or membership of the Traveller Community.

A key issue in respect of selection for redundancy is that the selection process must be seen to be fair and non-discriminatory. If an employee considers that he or she has been unfairly dismissed, he or she may apply to the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) for a hearing by a WRC Adjudication Officer of a case under the Unfair Dismissals Acts 1977 to 2007. If the Adjudication Officer finds that the dismissal was unfair, redress can take the form of either financial compensation, re-instatement or re-engagement.

Complaints can be made on an online complaint form available at the WRC's website www.workplacerelations.ie. The WRC's Customer Service Section, which provides information to both employers and employees in relation to employment, equality and industrial relations rights and obligations, can be contacted at Lo-call: 1890 80 80 90 or 059-9178990.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic

956. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the steps taken to ensure that employers cannot keep staff on indefinite lay-off in order to avoid redundancy payments at the end of a two year period. [7576/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The provisions of Section 12 of the Redundancy Payments Act 1967 (as amended) provide that an employee who has been temporarily laid-off or kept on short-time for four consecutive weeks, or for a series of six weeks within a thirteen week period of which not more than three are consecutive has an entitlement to claim redundancy from their employer.

These provisions were not considered adequate to deal with the current emergency situation. As a result of Covid-19, there have been immediate and unprecedented volumes of temporary lay-offs and short-time work and there is a very real potential for these situations to become protracted. Under the existing provisions these lay-off and short-time situations could result in a large number of redundancies in a very short period of time. Employers are obliged to pay redundancy entitlements to employees who have been temporarily laid off after the periods of time currently provided for in Section 12.

In the current emergency situation the existing timelines set out in Section 12 of the Act would have serious unintended and detrimental financial impacts on businesses and employees over a short period of time. Significant numbers of redundancies over a short period of time would have an adverse impact on the potential for a business to recover, which in turn would create many insolvency and bankruptcy situations. This will only exacerbate the risk of further job losses. Measures to assist the ongoing attachment between employees and their employer

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during the crisis is important.

For these reasons emergency legislation has been enacted by way of Section 29 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 to mitigate against the risks to businesses outlined above and to protect for as long as possible the attachment to employment for employees.

The existing provisions of Section 12 have effectively been suspended during the emergency period, from 13th March 2020 to 31st May 2020, in respect of an employee who has been laid off or kept on short time due to the effects of measures required to be taken by the employer in order to comply with, or as a consequence of, Government policy to prevent, limit, minimise or slow the spread of infection of Covid-19.

Extending the end date of the emergency period is provided for in legislation and an extension is currently being considered. In considering whether the end date will be extended, the Government will have regard to the principles which are set out in Section 29 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 and in particular the need to mitigate against the increased risk of insolvencies in the event of mass redundancies over a short period of time resulting in permanent job losses.

It is important to note that an employees' right to claim redundancy after a temporary period of lay off or short-time work has not been removed, rather it has been deferred for a temporary period in this emergency situation.

Domiciliary Care Allowance

957. **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. [7599/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): An application for domiciliary care allowance was received from the person concerned on the 4th September 2019. The application was not allowed as the child was not considered to satisfy the qualifying conditions for the allowance. A letter issued on the 15th November 2019 setting out the decision of the deciding officer to refuse the allowance.

A request for a review of the decision was received on the 21st November 2019 and an appeal was subsequently registered by the Social Welfare Appeals Office on the 28th November 2019. As part of the appeals process, the application was re-examined by a deciding officer and the person concerned was notified on the 23rd January 2020 that the review was unsuccessful. An appeal submission was prepared and forwarded to the Social Welfare Appeals Office on the 24th January 2020. The Social Welfare Appeals Office will contact the person directly about the outcome of the appeal.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 958 answered with Question No. 947.

Social Welfare Payments Administration

959. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of persons in receipt of pensions, disability allowance, jobseeker's al-

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lowance and benefit that do not have access to contactless payment methods (details supplied); the measures or actions she is taking to provide persons with a contactless payment option; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7640/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Contactless payment cards are not issued by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection but by financial institutions. Consequently, I am advised that my Department has no information on the number of persons in receipt of a social welfare payment who have access to this type of payment instrument.

Pension Provisions

960. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection further to Parliamentary Question No. 248 of 21 November 2019, if she will provide a further update on the proposed changes of the pension scheme in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7648/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Total Contributions Approach (TCA), when it is introduced, is intended to be a fairer and more transparent system where the person's lifetime contribution will be more closely reflected in the benefit received.

Consultation is a very important part of the development and design of such a new approach. With this in mind, a public consultation on the design of the TCA was launched on the 28th May 2018. A wide variety of stakeholder groups were invited to this launch. In addition, the consultation involved a number of workshops with representative bodies, and a briefing and Question & Answer session for Oireachtas members by Department officials in Leinster House.

The online consultation lasted for over three months and the Department received nearly 300 responses from individuals and organisations. Those submissions outlined the views of respondents upon a number of issues, including the number of years required for a full pension, provision for homecaring periods and for the self-employed.

Having carefully examined the outputs of the consultation process, officials in the Department are designing the scheme. It is anticipated that there will be significant recognition for homecaring periods in the new model. The intention is to bring a proposal to the new Government setting out that design.

Once agreed by Government, the Department would then set about introducing the reform by developing the necessary legislation, ICT systems, administrative processes, and crucially, a comprehensive information campaign for the general public. It is anticipated that TCA will replace the current Yearly Average and the interim TCA approaches for new applications for the State Pension at a future date.

I do hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Appeals

961. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of a social welfare payment reduction appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7655/20]

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Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I am advised by my Department that the person concerned is currently in receipt of Farm Assist with means of €115 being applied to the personal rate of €203 per week from 06/05/2020. The means up to 05/05/2020 were assessed as €65 per week, however this increased as a result of a review of the persons entitlement to the payment. The means were calculated based on documentation submitted by the person concerned with regard to his farm income and capital held in bank and credit union accounts.

Should the person concerned wish to discuss the means calculation they should contact their local Intreo Centre.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Invalidity Pension

962. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a decision has been made on a review of an invalidity pension application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7677/20]

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 this gentleman on 03 October 2019. He was refused IP on the grounds that the medical conditions for the scheme were not satisfied. He was notified on 08 January 2020 of this decision, the reasons for it and of his right of review and appeal.

The gentleman concerned subsequently appealed the decision to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO) and submitted further medical evidence in support of his application.

Following a review of all the information available it was decided that there was no change to the original decision. A submission has been prepared by the department and was forwarded to the SWAO on 21 May 2020 for determination. The SWAO will be in touch with him directly in due course in relation to the progress of his appeal.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Invalidity Pension

963. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a decision has been made on an invalidity pension application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7679/20]

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 25 February 2020. The

claim will be processed as quickly as possible and she will be notified directly of the outcome.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 964 answered with Question No. 916.

Question No. 965 answered with Question No. 907.

Question No. 966 answered with Question No. 926.

Social Welfare Payments Administration

967. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when she plans to revert to social welfare weekly payments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7716/20]

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.

Some payments, such as Maternity Benefit, Paternity Benefit and Parental Benefit, which are paid exclusively into a customer's bank account by Electronic Fund Transfer, have reverted to a weekly payment pattern. The reversion of other schemes to weekly payments remains under close review given the need to maintain social distancing.

Blind Person's Pension

968. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason, in circumstances in which persons become blind and receive illness benefit and the blind person's pension, and when the illness benefit expires, they move onto invalidity pension but they lose the blind person's pension even though they still continue to be blind; the reason the blind person's pension is payable to some blind persons and not to other blind persons; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7717/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Blind Pension is a means-tested payment for blind and visually impaired people between the ages of 18 and 66 who are habitually resident in Ireland. The payment is made up of a personal rate and extra amounts for a qualified adult and any child dependents.

Invalidity Pension is a pension paid to people who are permanently incapable of work because of illness. It is based on a claimant's social insurance contributions and is not means tested. To qualify for award of Invalidity Pension a claimant must satisfy both PRSI contribution and medical conditions.

In general, the social welfare system operates on the principle of one payment per person. There are some exceptions to the multiple payments rule in the case of the Blind Pension. Where a person is under age 66 and satisfies the relevant conditions, they may also qualify for

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the following short-term social welfare payments:

- Adoptive Benefit
- Half-rate Carer's Allowance
- Health and Safety Benefit
- Illness Benefit
- Injury Benefit
- Jobseeker's Benefit
- Maternity Benefit
- One-Parent Family Payment (until youngest child is 16)
- Widow's, Widower's or Surviving Civil Partner's Contributory and Non-Contributory Pension

Any change to these arrangements would have to be considered in the overall policy and budgetary contexts.

It is important to note that a blind or visually impaired person may also apply for Blind Welfare Allowance (BWA). The Blind Welfare Allowance is a means-tested payment from the Health Service Executive (HSE) to people who are blind or visually impaired. The allowance is paid to eligible people from 18 years of age.

Disability Allowance

969. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of a disability allowance appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7718/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I am advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that an Appeals Officer, having fully considered all of the available evidence, has decided to allow the appeal of the person concerned by way of a summary decision. The person concerned has been notified of the Appeals Officer's decision.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Invalidity Pension

970. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of an invalidity pension application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7727/20]

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 perma-

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nently 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 13 May 2020. The claim will be processed as quickly as possible and she will be notified directly of the outcome.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 971 answered with Question No. 918.

Disability Allowance

972. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the processing times for disability allowance applications. [7761/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): Disability allowance (DA) is a weekly allowance for people with a disability aged between 16 and 66 with a disability which is expected to last for at least one year and who satisfy the medical condition, means test and are habitually resident in Ireland.

The target processing time for DA is to process 75% of new claims within 12 weeks. In April 2020, 88% of applications were completed within the expected timeframe. The average time taken to award a DA claim was 7 weeks.

My department is committed to ensuring that claims are processed as expeditiously as possible. The DA scheme area is continuously monitored and reviewed to ensure applications are processed and customers are responded to as quickly as possible.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Benefits

973. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of an application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7781/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): Following a successful appeal, this gentleman has been awarded disability allowance (DA) with effect from 8 May 2019. He was notified of this decision on 3 April 2020. The first payment was made by his chosen payment method on 6 May 2020.

Arrears of payment due, were calculated to take account of any overlapping payments and have issued to the person concerned on 7 May 2020.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Appeals

974. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of an appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7782/20]

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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 referred on 14 April 2020 to an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented. The Social Welfare Appeals Office has also advised me that a decision will issue in respect of this appeal in the coming week.

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.

Social Welfare Benefits

975. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of an application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7783/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): I can confirm that the above named person applied for disability allowance (DA) on 13 February 2020.

On 1 May 2020 this lady's application for DA was withdrawn as she failed to reply to an option letter which issued to her on 6 March 2020 asking her to confirm if she wished to proceed with her DA claim or stay on her current social welfare payment which is being paid at a higher rate.

The person concerned was notified of this decision in writing on 1 May 2020. It is open to this lady to request a review of this decision or to appeal it to the independent social welfare appeals office (SWAO).

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Benefits

976. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of an application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7785/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): The person concerned submitted an application for disability allowance (DA) on 25 February 2020. Their application, based upon all the evidence submitted, was refused on medical grounds as it was not found that this lady was substantially restricted in taking up employment.

The person concerned was notified in writing of this decision on 14 April 2020 and was also notified of their right to request a review of this decision or to appeal it to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO). No request for an appeal or review has been received.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the deputy.

Questions - Written Answers
Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

977. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the pandemic unemployment payment will be extended to a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7788/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I am advised that as the person concerned was not in employment on or after 6th March 2020 and does not meet the criteria for receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment. However, the person concerned continues to receive a Jobseekers Allowance payment.

It is open to the person concerned may contact their local Community Welfare Officer with a view to making an application for Supplementary Welfare Allowance if they are experiencing financial difficulty in relation to meeting their outgoings.

I trust that this clarifies the position.

Disability Allowance

978. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will review the terms governing the disability allowance to allow the recipient's pensions to be treated the same as income; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7797/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Social welfare legislation provides that, for social assistance schemes such as Disability Allowance, income and capital (such as savings, investments and property other than the family home) belonging to the claimant and his or her partner, where applicable, is assessable for means assessment purposes.

For Disability Allowance, income from all sources, such as from an occupational pension or social welfare pensions from another country are taken into account in the means test. The purpose of this is to maintain the policy of ensuring that social welfare expenditure is targeted to those who need it most.

The assessment of means can vary from scheme to scheme depending on the nature and purpose of the scheme. Sometimes a certain amount of income, or income from particular sources, is not taken into account for a particular scheme. This is known as an income disregard.

There is an earnings disregard in place for recipients of Disability Allowance which allows them to earn up to €120 per week and retain their full payment, while only half of earnings between €120 and €350 are assessed in the means test. This aims to achieve a balance between ensuring resources are targeted towards those with the greatest need while supporting people to take up employment opportunities.

In addition, Disability Allowance is unique in the social welfare system as the first €50,000 of capital (e.g. savings, shares, property) is disregarded in the capital means test. This compares to €20,000 for most other social assistance schemes.

Any changes to the disregards or the income thresholds of social welfare schemes would have cost implications and would have to be considered in the overall policy and budgetary context.

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Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

979. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the entitlements students that had signed contracts for summer internships which have now been cancelled have in terms of social welfare payments; and her plans to assist students in summer 2020 that are out of work due to the Covid-19 pandemic. [7803/20]

987. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will provide for a financial support package to a cohort of persons (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7932/20]

996. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the options open for persons registered and studying with an online course, for example, in a college (details supplied) in which they are being classed as full-time students by her Department but are available to work and have been advised that there is no option for making a social welfare payment available to them; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7997/20]

1000. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a specific emergency social protection payment will be introduced for international students that are not eligible for the pandemic unemployment payment and do not have a PPSN or are not able to find work in view of the fact that the exceptional needs payment does not adequately address the precarious situation they are in; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8039/20]

1016. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her views on enabling full-time students that cannot get usual part-time or seasonal employment due to Covid-19 temporary access to the jobseeker's allowance or a comparable allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8213/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 979, 987, 996, 1000 and 1016 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 be of working age between 18 and up to 66 years old, have been in employment immediately before 13th March and have lost their income from employment. A student who satisfies these conditions, including an international student, is eligible for this payment.

Where a student was due to take up an internship or seasonal work but was not actually in employment they would not be eligible to receive the COVID-19 pandemic unemployment payment. 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.

Where a student is experiencing financial hardship they can apply for financial support under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme. In order to access this support, a Personal Public Services Number (PPSN) is required. The Department has temporarily postponed the SAFE registration process, carried out in local offices of the Department, in respect of people applying for a Personal Public Services Number (PPSN). This decision was taken in order to comply with guidelines in respect of social distancing. As a result of the postponement of the SAFE process, an email and postal service has now been introduced. Detailed information on

this service is available on www.gov.ie.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Question No. 980 answered with Question No. 947.

Supplementary Welfare Allowance

981. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a weekly court ordered maintenance payment received by a person from a former spouse is regarded as means for the purposes of the supplementary welfare allowance scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7817/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): 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.

The means test for the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme requires that all types of household income, include maintenance payments, must be taken into account in determining a person's entitlement under the scheme.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 982 answered with Question No. 916.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

983. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the social protection assistance available to a person (details supplied) who lives in Northern Ireland but runs a business in Dundalk, County Louth and does not qualify for TWSS; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7895/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): EU social security co-ordination rules are set out in Regulation (EC) No. 883/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2004 on the co-ordination of social security systems (and the associated implementing Regulation 987/2009). The Regulations define a frontier worker as meaning "any person pursuing an activity as an employed or self-employed person in a Member State and who resides in another Member State to which he returns as a rule daily or at least once a week".

The general rules relating to Unemployment Benefit entitlements for frontier workers (both employed and self-employed contributors) are set out in Article 65 of the Regulation. Article 65 provides that wholly unemployed frontier workers are entitled to receive Unemployment Benefits from the Member State of residence, while partially or intermittently unemployed frontier workers are entitled to receive Unemployment Benefits from the Member State of employment.

Article 65a, to which the Deputy referred in the details supplied, provides for a derogation from the rules set out in Article 65 in the case of wholly unemployed frontier workers where there is no Unemployment Benefit cover for self-employed persons in the Member State of residence.

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I have been advised that the person referred to by the Deputy has made a claim for job-seeker's benefit (self-employed) and that this has been awarded and is due to go into payment this Thursday (27 May).

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 984 answered with Question No. 926.

Covid-19 Pandemic

985. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of social protection offices which have been closed and sanitised due to the presentation of Covid-19 positive applicants at public desks applying for the Covid 19 enhanced illness benefit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7904/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): No offices have been closed because a customer claiming to have COVID19 has presented in the office.

The Department has a specific protocol for cleaning based on Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) guidance.

Where a customer or a member of staff presents with symptoms the area in which they spent time, such as a desk, public counter or toilet will be closed off until it can be cleaned.

The HPSC has issued a guidance document, which sets out the required cleaning standards following confirmation of a case in the workplace. This is adhered to by our cleaning service.

There are two levels of cleaning being used:

Level 1 Daily Sanitisation Cleaning (Prevention) – This is a cleaning service with a focus on sanitisation touch points and communal areas. It is carried out by our onsite cleaning team.

Level 2 One-off preventative deep clean – This is a cleaning service with a focus on deep sanitisation of surfaces and touch points with increased levels of chemicals and PPE. It is carried out by specialist deep cleaning team (by prior arrangement).

A deeper clean (referred to as level 2) will be used where there have been confirmed cases of COVID-19 or persons who meet the criteria for testing within an office during the last 72 hours.

Question No. 986 answered with Question No. 907.

Question No. 987 answered with Question No. 979.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

988. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when arrears payments relating to the pandemic unemployment payment will be made to applicants; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7933/20]

995. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when backdated pandemic unemployment payments will issue for the weeks while persons were waiting while her Department was dealing with the backlog resulting in applicants receiv-

ing no payment (details supplied) [7979/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 988 and 995 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, over 4.9 million payments have issued to just over 670,000 individuals at a cost of over €1.7 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

989. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if persons in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment should sign on for credits to ensure that they do not lose out during time out of work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7939/20]

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 which resulted from the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic.

The issue of social insurance contributions for employees who qualify for receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment is currently being considered and any necessary legislation will be brought forward.

I trust that this clarifies the matter.

Question No. 990 answered with Question No. 947.

Legislative Measures

991. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the legislation under the remit of her Department that is due to expire or lapse in the next

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three months and needs to be renewed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7944/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): A. The *Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020 (Continuation of Part 2) Order 2020* (S.I. No.155 of 2020) <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2020/si/155/made/en/print> provides that the amendments effected by Part 2 of the *Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020* (No. 1 of 2020) will continue until 19th June 2020.

In conjunction with the above Order, the following Regulations also cease to have effect as follows:

1. The *Social Welfare (Increase for Qualified Adult) Regulations 2020* (S.I. No. 96 of 2020) <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2020/si/96/made/en/print> which provided for an additional increase in payments for qualified adults cease to have effect, in so far as they relate to jobseeker's allowance on 17th June 2020, in so far as they relate to jobseeker's benefit and jobseeker's benefit (self-employed) on 18th June 2020, and in so far as they relate to illness benefit on 22nd June 2020.

2. The *Social Welfare (Consolidated Claims, Payments and Control) (Amendment) (No. 4) (Illness Benefit payments arising from COVID-19) Regulations 2020* (S.I. No 97 of 2020) <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2020/si/97/made/en/print> which provided for special arrangements for the payment of illness benefit to those who are diagnosed with Covid-19 by a medical practitioner or who are certified by a medical practitioner to be a probable source of infection of Covid-19 cease to have effect on 19th June 2020.

3. The *Social Welfare (Consolidated Claims, Payments and Control) (Amendment) (No. 5) (Emergency Measures in the Public Interest-Jobseeker's Allowance) Regulations 2020* (S.I. No. 163 of 2020) <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2020/si/163/made/en/print> which provided for suspension of the rule whereby jobseeker's allowance is paid only from the fourth day of unemployment cease to have effect on 19th June 2020.

4. The *Social Welfare (Consolidated Claims, Payments and Control) (Amendment) (No. 6) (Emergency Measures in the Public Interest-Jobseeker's Benefit) Regulations 2020* (S.I. No. 164 of 2020) <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2020/si/164/made/en/print> which provided for suspension of the rule whereby jobseeker's benefit is paid only from the fourth day of unemployment cease to have effect on 19th June 2020.

B. Section 29 of the *Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020* (No. 2 of 2020), which provides for an emergency period during which section 12 of the *Redundancy Payments Act 1967* shall not have effect, ends on 31st May 2020, unless the emergency period is extended by Government Order. Extending the emergency period for the purposes of this section of the Redundancy Act is under consideration by Government.

C. Part 9 (sections 30-33) of the *Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020* (No. 2 of 2020) provided for amendments to the *Civil Registration Act 2004* to allow for the modified operation of certain aspects of the civil registration system, if required, for a limited period ending on 31st May 2020, unless extended by Government Order. Extending the period during which a birth or death can be registered remotely is being considered.

Carer's Allowance

992. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protec-

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tion the reason a carer's allowance appeal lodged by a person (details supplied) within 21 days of a decision of a review request is not being accepted; her plans to change the law to ensure that the Appeals Office must accept an appeal within 21 days of the final decision after a review has been turned down; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7945/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I am advised that application for carer's allowance by the person concerned was disallowed by a Deciding Officer of the Department on 30 April 2019. The person concerned sought a review of the decision on 30 May 2019 and was informed by the Department on 10 September 2019 that the decision was not being revised. He again sought a review on 1 October 2019 and was again informed by the Department on 6 January 2020 that the decision was not being revised.

I am further advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that notice of appeal was received from the person concerned on 30 January 2020. In the normal course, an appeal against the decision of a Deciding Officer must be made within 21 days of a decision being notified. Under social welfare legislation a "decision" which is not revised or altered on review is not itself a "decision" or a "revised decision" and is not capable of being appealed. In effect, I am advised that the only decision that exists is the original decision of the Deciding Officer and the time limit of 21 days for submitting an appeal runs from the date of that decision. Appeals received outside of this time limit may be accepted at the discretion of the Chief Appeals Officer but in view of the length of time which had elapsed since the person concerned was notified of the Department's decision of 30 April 2019 the person concerned was advised that an appeal could not be accepted at that late stage.

However, it is my understanding that, after further consideration of the particular circumstances of this case, the Chief Appeals Officer has decided to accept this late appeal. The person concerned will now be notified of this outcome.

Any changes to the legislation relating to the time period within which the Social Welfare Appeals Office may accept an appeal would have to be considered in the overall policy context.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

993. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the status of being on maternity leave prior to being put on lay-off from employment renders a worker ineligible for receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7946/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment is available to support persons aged between 18 and 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 immediately prior to 13th March.

People currently on maternity leave should remain on that leave until such time as they are due to return to employment. If that employment is no longer available as a consequence of the pandemic, the women concerned are eligible for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment from the date when they were due to return to their employment after their maternity leave.

I trust this clarifies the position.

994. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the protections in place to ensure the health and safety and terms and conditions of employment of construction workers returning to work during the Covid-19 period; if the protections are equally available to agency workers and subcontractors; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7970/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Terms of Employment (Information) Act 1994 provides that an employer must provide their employee with a written statement of the particulars of the employee's terms of employment. It also provides that an employer must notify the employee of any changes in the particulars given in the statement. The Act provides a right of complaint to the Workplace Relations Commission where an employer fails to comply with either of the above.

While an employer may renegotiate the terms and conditions of the contract of employment with an employee, they may not reduce any term of condition to a level lower than statutory entitlement. It is best practice that any such renegotiation should be undertaken in consultation with the affected employee, and taking a longterm view of the employment relationship.

The Sectoral Employment Order (Construction Sector) 2019 came into effect on 1 October 2019. This sets the statutory minimum rates of pay and other conditions (sick pay and pension entitlements) for persons employed in the construction sector.

Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005, employers have a duty to ensure the health and safety of their employees in the workplace. Both of these legislative instruments come within the remit of my colleague, Heather Humphreys, Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 995 answered with Question No. 988.

Question No. 996 answered with Question No. 979.

Working Family Payment

997. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will amend the requirement for 38 hours or more per fortnight for those eligible for the working family payment in view of the fact hours have been reduced for many workers. [8024/20]

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 April 2020 the support is paid to approximately 51,793 in respect of some 116,275 children.

Customers who are in receipt of Working Family Payment and the Pandemic Unemploy-

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ment Payment are considered to be meeting the eligibility requirements of Working Family Payment in this situation and their payment is not ceased at this time.

It is 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 compromised 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. For individuals who have lost their employment entirely they may apply for the Covid Pandemic Unemployment Payment. Details of all of the supports available from my Department and how to apply for them can be found at www.gov.ie

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

998. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if provision is being made for the pandemic unemployment payment to be extended for students with a high-risk health status and that have been advised by their general practitioners not to return to work in the hospitality industry. [8031/20]

1017. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to ensure all meat plant workers whose health or employment has been negatively impacted by the Covid-19 clusters are provided with the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment and illness benefit. [8215/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 998 and 1017 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 this payment are that a person must be of working age between 18 and up to 66 years old, have been in employment immediately prior to 13th March and have lost their employment income. Employees who satisfy these conditions, which can include those in meat processing or students, are eligible to the COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment if they satisfy these conditions.

Where an employee has had their hours reduced and is unemployed for 4 days or more in a week they can apply for the social-insurance based jobseekers benefit or the means tested job-seeker’s allowance scheme. If they have been put on a short time working week on a temporary basis they may be eligible for short time work support.

If a person in employment is diagnosed with COVID 19 they can apply for COVID 19 illness benefit. A person who is a probable source of infection of COVID 19 and is self-isolating can also apply for COVID 19 Illness Benefit as they will have either been certified by their doctor or will have received text notification from the HSE where they have been contact-traced or otherwise personally identified and advised by the HSE as being a probable source of infection.

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Where a person does not qualify for these payments and is experiencing financial hardship they can apply for financial support under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme.

I trust that this clarifies the matter.

Question No. 999 answered with Question No. 937.

Question No. 1000 answered with Question No. 979.

Company Liquidations

1001. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to the decision of the owners of a company (details supplied) to transfer valuable assets to its UK parent company, which results in an increased cost to the State in redundancy payments from the State insolvency fund. [8047/20]

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.

Once a company becomes insolvent and enters into a court supervised liquidation process the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection is obliged by law to make statutory redundancy and other wage related entitlements to eligible employees. Payments are made from the Social Insurance Fund. When such payments are made I, as Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, become a preferential creditor in the liquidation process and a dedicated debt management unit in the Department will engage with the liquidator in relation to any possible recovery of the debt.

The other matters raised in the question relate to company law provisions which are the responsibility of my colleague the Minister for Business, Enterprise & Innovation.

Employment Support Services

1002. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if supports or grants are available for the employment of a person to provide assistance to a self-employed person with a disability undertake business activities. [8048/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): In addition to providing income supports, the Department provides a wide range of employment-related supports, for both jobseekers with disabilities and employers (including the self-employed) seeking to employ a jobseeker with a disability or retain an existing employee who has or acquires a disability. A summary of the employment supports available is set out below.

Services to support employers in the recruitment of staff

Details of these services can be found at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/86ab7d-intreo->

for-employers/

The Department also provides the Back to Work Enterprise Allowance (BTWEA) scheme to support persons to become self-employed. The BTWEA programme has been designed so customers who avail of it retain a percentage of their income support payment for up to 2 years. Persons in receipt of a wide range of income supports, including disability allowance and blind pension, are eligible for the scheme. Details of the scheme are available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/f215a4-back-to-work-enterprise-allowance/#how-to-qualify>

The provision of personal assistant services for persons with disabilities is a matter which comes under the Health Service Executive (HSE).

Summary of employment supports available Wage Subsidy Scheme

The Wage Subsidy Scheme is targeted at private sector employers and is aimed at encouraging the employment of people with disabilities through the provision of financial incentives (a wage subsidy).

Reasonable Accommodation Fund

The Reasonable Accommodation Fund (RAF) assists both jobseekers with disabilities and employers (including the self-employed) 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 can apply for 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) pro-

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vides 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.

I hope that this information is of assistance to the Deputy.

Social Welfare Appeals

1003. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason there is no response in relation to social welfare appeals some of which are dating back to the middle of 2019; the status of appeals by persons (details supplied); and when a decision will be made. [8086/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): 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 am advised that the Social Welfare Appeals Office that the number of appeals on hand in the Office, as of 1 May 2020, was 7,590. The corresponding figure for the end of 2019 was 8,788.

This year has seen an increase in the number of appeals being finalised. 8,965 appeals were finalised in the period January-April 2020 compared to 6,788 in the corresponding period for 2019.

The average appeal processing time for the year 2019 was 23.8 weeks. There has been some improvement to date in 2020 as the average appeal processing time for the period January to April was 20.7 weeks.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office has also advised me that the queries in respect of the eight individual cases referred to by the Deputy have been answered by way of email directly to the Deputy's office.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Public Services Card

1004. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if it is possible for the purposes of receiving assistance from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to supply a PPS number or present valid identification in the place of a public services card number in view of the fact that her Department has temporarily postponed the appointment service for allocating the card; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8109/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Following contact from the Deputy's office, I am advised that officials in my Department have established that the details supplied do not relate to the question asked and were incorrectly submitted along with the Parliamentary Question.

I understand that the matter at issue is proper to the Department of Children and Youth Af-

fairs.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Jobseeker's Payments

1005. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when jobseeker's allowance will issue to a person (details supplied); if an exceptional needs payment can be arranged in the interim; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8110/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The person concerned submitted a jobseeker's allowance claim on 23/03/2020. However this claim was closed as documentation issued to the address supplied was returned by An Post stating the person was no longer at the address. A subsequent Jobseeker's Allowance claim was submitted on 13/04/2020, I am advised that this was closed due to outstanding documentation not being provided.

I am further advised that there is a basic supplementary welfare allowance claim open since 21/04/2020. Requests for additional information in support of this application were issued to the person concerned on 14/04/2020, 23/04/2020, 06/05/2020 and 13/05/2020. When the requested information is submitted, a decision can be made on this claim.

Should the person concerned be experiencing financial difficulties, it is open to her to submit a request for an Exceptional Needs Payment. The Community Welfare Officer can be contacted on 045 491500 (option 5).

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Public Services Card

1006. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the estimated timeframe for the reopening of the appointment service for allocating the public services card; the arrangements in place for those requiring a card in the intervening period; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8111/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The SAFE registration process, which my Department uses to authenticate a person's identity, is a face-to-face process which results in the issuing of a Public Services Card (PSC).

Since the outbreak of the Covid 19 Pandemic, my Department has temporarily suspended the SAFE registration process. This decision was taken in order to comply with HSE and WHO guidelines in respect of social distancing.

The re-introduction of the SAFE registration process will be done on a phased basis and is being co-ordinated at a senior level within my Department. Its re-introduction will be done in accordance with all relevant HSE and Government guidelines to ensure the health and safety of the Department's customers and staff.

Anyone who has lost their PSC can contact the Department and a replacement will be issued. Where the Department has written to a person inviting them to renew their PSC, they can do so by post. It should also be noted that the National Transport Authority has confirmed that

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expired Free Travel PSCs will be accepted on public transport for the time being.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

State Pension (Contributory)

1007. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a person (details supplied) meets the criteria to receive a State pension (contributory); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8114/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Pension entitlement is determined on the basis of the eligibility conditions applicable on the date an individual reaches pension age. The pension age is due to increase to 67 years in 2021. Since the person concerned was born in 1957, they will reach pension age in 2024.

Future pension entitlement will depend on factors such as a person's social insurance record, their attachment to the workforce, and their countries of employment. It is advisable that all contributors maintain their social insurance record as fully as possible over their working life.

I have arranged for a copy of their social insurance contribution record to issue to the person concerned. They should apply for State pension (contributory) approximately 6 months before reaching pension age. Their entitlement to pension will then be determined on the basis of the eligibility conditions in force and they will be notified in writing of the decision.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 1008 answered with Question No. 916.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

1009. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason for stopping the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment to residents in direct provision centres who lost their jobs as a result of the crisis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8123/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): 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.

Applicants for International Protection accommodated under the system of Direct Provision operated by the International Protection Accommodation Services of the Department of Justice and Equality are provided with full board accommodation and other facilities and services. People in direct provision receive a daily expenses allowance payment from my Department payable at the weekly rate of €38.80 for adults and €29.80 for children. In this situation, the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment is not payable where the person's needs are being met through the services provided by the accommodation centre and the daily expenses allowance payment.

Where applicants for International Protection live in the community outside the direct provision system, they are eligible for the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment if they meet the conditions for the payment.

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Applicants for international protection receive can continue to receive assistance under the Exceptional Needs Payment scheme to meet with any costs that cannot be met from their weekly allowance.

I trust that this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Company Closures

1010. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the actions she plans to take regarding the closure of a business (details supplied); and if changes in legislation are planned to prevent employers taking similar actions in the months ahead specifically in respect of redundancy legislation and the provisions of the Protection of Employees (Fixed-Term Work) Act 2003. [8124/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Firstly, I would like to say that my thoughts are with all Debenhams workers who are dealing with job losses at this difficult time. As deputies are well aware, with the exception of grocery outlets, the retail sector has been particularly affected by the economic turmoil caused by Covid-19. Having come through a number of turbulent years and an examinership process, it is regrettable that the Debenhams workers now face redundancy.

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

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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.

My officials inform me that the notification and consultation requirements of that Act, as they are construed, have also been complied with.

The employee representatives are aware that there are other avenues of recourse outside seeking ministerial intervention and I hope they consider their options in that regard.

The Protection of Employees (Fixed-Term Work) Act, 2003 offers significant protection to fixed term workers and the purpose of this legislation is:

1. to ensure that fixed term workers are afforded no less favourable treatment than their comparable permanent counterparts and
2. to prevent employers from abusing employees by employing them on a series of successive short fixed term contracts, rather than offering them a permanent one.

An employee who has worked continuously for at least 104 weeks under a fixed-term or specified purpose contract may qualify for a redundancy payment when the contract ends. In order for any permanent employee to qualify for redundancy they also require the same service so there is no distinction under the Fixed Term Work Act.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Redundancy Payments

1011. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to amend the law suspending the right of workers to claim redundancy payments to exclude from the law workers whose employers have had a liquidator appointed by the High Court and that are therefore closed permanently; if so, when is it planned to amend same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8128/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I understand this question to be related to the recent emergency legislation which was enacted by way of Section 29 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020. This measure effectively suspends the provisions of Section 12 of the Redundancy Payments Act 1967 (as amended) which relate to the rights of an employee to claim a redundancy entitlement from their employer after temporary periods of lay-off and short-time work during the Covid-19 emergency period.

Unfortunately in situations where a company is insolvent and a liquidator has been appointed by the court, the reality is that employees will be made redundant by their employer. I

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have no statutory power to intervene in such court supervised liquidations which is governed by company law. My Department provides a safety net for employees in these situations and statutory redundancy payments and other wage related entitlements can be made from the Social Insurance Fund.

Domiciliary Care Allowance

1012. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of applications from counties Longford and Westmeath for the domiciliary care allowance in 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form; the number of applications that were refused in the same period; and the number later granted on appeal for the same period. [8163/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The data requested in respect of domiciliary care allowance (DCA) is not routinely collated on an individual county basis and as a result is not available.

National data, for 2019, the last full year for which data on DCA is available, is shown below. Details of the applications processed in 2019, together with the outcomes, both at initial decision stage and subsequently on appeal are listed below .

DCA applications processed and outcomes 2019.

Year	Application-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.

Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance Scheme

1013. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if those in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment will be entitled to the back to school clothing and footwear allowance. [8166/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The

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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

1014. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a Covid-19 payment will be made available to a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8184/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) was introduced by my Department in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is an income support payment for both employees and the self-employed who have become fully unemployed due to a downturn in economic activity related to Covid-19. One of the qualifying criteria for this payment is that the person is aged between 18 and 66 years. Unfortunately on this basis the person concerned does not qualify for this income support.

According to the records of my Department, the person concerned is currently in receipt of a State Pension (contributory).

If the person concerned is experiencing financial difficulties it is open to him to contact his local Community Welfare Service in the Newbridge Intreo Centre where his circumstances will be assessed. Under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme, 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 Community Welfare Service can be contacted by phone at 045 491500 (option 5).

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 1015 answered with Question No. 907.

Question No. 1016 answered with Question No. 979.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1018. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the way in which a person that requires a verified MyGovID account can set one up during the current Covid-19 emergency in view of the fact that a person must attend the social welfare office as part of setting up a verified account; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8216/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): To verify a MyGovID account, a person must have authenticated their identity through the SAFE registration process and also verify their mobile phone number.

By verifying their mobile number, a security code can be sent to them to verify their account. They are also sent a security code to their number each time they use your MyGovID account to access government online services.

The Department has temporarily postponed the SAFE registration service. This decision was taken in order to comply with HSE and WHO guidelines in respect of social distancing.

While the opening hours of Intreo Centres have also been restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, offices are still open and anyone wishing to verify their mobile phone by calling to an office is able to do so. Many people have done so over recent weeks.

In addition, my Department has introduced alternative methods of verifying mobile phone numbers. Numbers can be verified by calling my Department at LoCall 1890 927 999 or 071 967 2616. Callers are asked certain security questions to verify their identity and their phone number can then be verified by the person dealing with their call.

A person can also verify their number by accessing their basic MyGovID account and entering their mobile phone number. If they hold a driver's licence and have provided their mobile number to the National Driving Licence Service, both numbers are compared and, if they match, the mobile phone number is verified and they can proceed to verify their MyGovID account.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Rent Supplement Scheme

1019. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the uptake of rent supplement; the number of claims received; the speed with which claims are being processed; the level of approval rates; and the reasons for being refused and so on. [8229/20]

1020. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason rent supplement applicants that are eligible under the rent supplement scheme as prescribed but not seeking nor eligible for the Covid-19 payment are being refused rent supplement; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8230/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1019 and 1020 together.

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Rent supplement continues to play a key role in supporting families and individuals in private rented accommodation, with the scheme currently supporting approximately 20,400 recipients. The scheme provides short-term income support, to eligible people living in private rented accommodation whose means are insufficient to meet their accommodation costs and who do not have accommodation available to them from any other source.

Since the introduction of Covid emergency response approximately 6,500 have been provided rent supplement. There are currently 1,873 applications awaiting a decision. I am advised by my Department that statistics in relation to overall approval/refusal rates in relation to the Scheme are not currently available.

In the context of the Covid emergency, for persons to be eligible for Rent Supplement, once it has been confirmed that they are a genuine (bona fide) tenant the two principle qualification criteria apply:

- The customer was in receipt of Rent Supplement in the last 12 months before the date of application; or,

- The customer was living in private rented accommodation prior to the Covid emergency (at least 4 weeks), could afford their rent at the beginning of the tenancy and were now unable to continue to pay the rent because of a substantial change in their circumstances.

As part of the pandemic response, given the expected high level of new applications over a short time period, and to ensure customers' needs were being met as efficiently as possible, a revised 5-page application form was introduced.

The timescale for determining individual applications for rent supplement is dependent, among other things, on the availability of the required information including confirmation of the applicant's income, tenancy documentation and rent details. For the vast majority of cases most applications can be processed within 2/3 days of receipt of the application where the necessary information has been provided and the application form completed appropriately.

If the Deputy has a concern in relation to processing times in a particular area or in respect of an individual, if he provides this detail, my Department will follow up and provide appropriate feedback. I am satisfied that the Department's staff dealing with these applications continue to make every effort to ensure rent supplement applications are processed efficiently and in a timely manner.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Housing Assistance Payment

1021. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of deposits issued in respect of HAP tenancies since the commencement of the Covid-19 crisis. [8231/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): Under the Supplementary Allowance scheme, the Department may make a single Exceptional Needs Payment (ENP) to help meet essential, once-off expenditure which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet from their weekly income. Decisions are made 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.

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An application may be made under the ENP scheme for assistance with the a payment of a rent deposit by tenants supported under both the rent supplement scheme and the housing assistance payment (HAP). I am advised that there have been 163 ENPs for rent deposits made from 16 March 2020 to 16 May 2020.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1022. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the provisions that have been made for self-employed persons experiencing reductions in their gross income that are now operating at a loss when operating expenses are taken into account and have no income at present; if self-employed persons will be allowed to avail of the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment support; and if not, the support available to them. [8233/20]

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 which resulted from the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic. For self-employed people, 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.

Where a self-employed person does not qualify for this emergency payment they can apply for a jobseekers payment. Jobseekers benefit (self-employed) was one of the measures I introduced in late 2019 which is available for self-employed people who have ceased trading. If a person's business is operating at a reduced level they may be eligible to apply for support under the means tested jobseeker's allowance scheme.

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 Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme administered by the Revenue Commissioners is available to employers who keep employees on the payroll throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning employers can retain links with employees for when business picks up after the crisis.

I trust this clarifies the situation.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1023. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the breakdown by profession of working age persons diagnosed with Covid-19. [8235/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): I am advised that the information requested in respect of the breakdown by profession of working age persons diagnosed with Covid-19 by the Deputy is not available in my Department, it does however fall under the remit of my colleague in the Department of Health.

However estimates of the employment sector for those medically certified for the Enhanced Illness Benefit claim are available each week on my Department's Covid statistics website.

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f4c60c-covid-19-statistics/>

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The latest information for May 25th 2020 is attached herein. Note that the sector of those who have a medical certificate for the Enhanced Illness Benefit has been estimated based on the activity of the last known employer.

Industrial Sector	Number of people who are medically certified for meeting the conditions for receipt of a Covid-19 Enhanced Illness Benefit payment, by sector
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing; Mining and Quarrying	400
Manufacturing	6,300
Electricity, gas, steam supply; Water supply; Sewerage, waste management	200
Construction	1,800
Wholesale and Retail Trade; Repair of Motor Vehicles and motorcycles	9,900
Transportation and storage	1,900
Accommodation and food service activities	1,800
Information and communication activities	800
Financial and insurance activities	1,900
Real Estate activities	400
Professional, Scientific and Technical activities	1,500
Administrative and support service activities	4,600
Public Administration And Defence; Compulsory Social Security	1,900
Education	800
Human Health And Social Work activities	10,300
Arts, entertainment and recreation	300
Other Sectors	1,400
Unclassified or unknown	300
Total	46,500

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1024. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if consideration has been given to temporary extensions for those on social welfare payments other than the pandemic unemployment payment which are due to cease in view of the global crisis; and if a freeze on the cessation of illness payments will be considered in view of the Covid-19 crisis (details supplied). [8236/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Regina Doherty): The Department offers income supports through a range of social insurance benefits and means-tested social assistance payments.

Entitlement to social insurance benefits, such as Illness Benefit, is dependent on a person's Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI) contribution history.

Where a person does not have sufficient contributions to qualify for a social insurance ben-

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enefit or reaches the end of their entitlement, they may qualify for further income support through a mean-tested social assistance payment.

Social assistance schemes 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.

In the example outlined by the Deputy, a person may be in receipt of Illness Benefit for up to two years, depending on their PRSI contribution history. If a claimant remains unable to return to work after this period, other income supports may be available, depending on their circumstances:

- If they are likely to be permanently incapable of work and satisfy the PRSI conditions, they may qualify for Invalidity Pension;

- If they have a disability that is expected to last for a year or more, they may qualify for Disability Allowance;

- If they do not qualify for any other payments but remain in need of income support, they may qualify for a basic Supplementary Welfare Allowance.

In this way, an individual who has insufficient means, and whose entitlement to a social insurance payment has expired, can access income support through means tested payments

The Department regularly reviews its supports and payment schemes to ensure that they continue to meet their objectives. Any change to the current eligibility criteria would have to be considered in an overall policy and budgetary context.

Disability Allowance

1025. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will review the decision in relation to an application for disability allowance by a person (details supplied); and if the request for a review will be expedited. [8241/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): Following a review of the entitlement of this gentleman, it was found that he had a decrease in his means from his original assessment. Based on the information available to my department, an increased rate of disability allowance (DA) was awarded with effect from 16 October 2019.

A letter issued to this gentleman informing him of this on 25 May 2020. Arrears of payment due have also issued to the person concerned.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Commercial Rates

1026. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if offices on contract of service (details supplied) with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection are exempt from the payment of rates; and if he will

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make a statement on the matter. [7309/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy John Paul Phelan): The question of liability of particular properties for rates is a matter for the Commissioner of Valuation, who is independent in the exercise of his functions under the Valuation Act 2001, as amended. The making of valuations for rating purposes is the sole responsibility of the Commissioner and I, as Minister, have no function in decisions in this regard.

The Valuation Acts 2001 to 2019 provide that all buildings used or developed for any purpose are rateable unless expressly exempted under Schedule 4 of the Acts.

There are a number of options available to an occupier of a rateable property who is dissatisfied with a determination of valuation made under the provisions of the Valuation Acts 2001-2015. Firstly, before a determination is made, they may make representations to the Valuation Office in relation to a proposed valuation. Later in the process, if the occupier is still dissatisfied with the determination, there is a right of appeal to the Valuation Tribunal, which is an independent body set up for the purpose of hearing appeals against determinations of the Valuation Office. There is also a right of appeal to the Higher Courts on a point of law.

Wind Energy Guidelines

1027. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the position regarding the proposed wind energy development guidelines following the recent public consultation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7467/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): My Department is currently undertaking a focused review of the 2006 Wind Energy Development Guidelines in line with the “preferred draft approach” which was announced in June 2017 by the then Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, in conjunction with the then Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment. The review is addressing a number of key aspects including sound or noise, visual amenity setback distances, shadow flicker, community obligation, community dividend and grid connections.

As part of the overall review process, a strategic environmental assessment (SEA) is being undertaken on the revised Guidelines before they come into effect, in accordance with the requirements of European Union Directive 2001/24/EC on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment, otherwise known as the SEA Directive. SEA is a process by which environmental considerations are required to be fully integrated into the preparation of plans and programmes which act as frameworks for development consent, prior to their final adoption, with public consultation as part of that process.

As part of the SEA process, I launched a ten-week public consultation on the draft revised Wind Energy Development Guidelines on 12 December 2019. The documents prepared for consultation are available on my Department’s website at the following link: <https://www.housing.gov.ie/guidelines/wind-energy/public-consultation-revised-wind-energy-development-guidelines> .

The consultation closed on 19 February 2020. Almost 500 submissions have been received as part of the public consultation, many of which are extremely detailed and technical in nature. My Department, in conjunction with the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment, is currently analysing the submissions received.

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Finalised Guidelines will be prepared following detailed analysis and consideration of the submissions received during the consultation phase, and the conclusion of the SEA process. When finalised, the revised Guidelines will be issued under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended. Planning authorities and, where applicable, An Bord Pleanála, must have regard to guidelines issued under section 28 in the performance of their functions generally under the Planning Acts. In the meantime, the current 2006 Wind Energy Development Guidelines remain in force.

Land Development Agency

1028. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the amount of funding approved for the LDA in 2018, 2019 and 2020; the amount drawn down by the LDA in each of these years; the amount of LDA borrowing approved by his Department in 2018, 2019 and 2020; and the amount of borrowing incurred by the LDA in each of these years. [7642/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The 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.

At present, funding is provided to the LDA through my Department's Vote to meet its operational costs as well as initial capital funding in relation to the development of its projects. A breakdown of the allocated funding and funding drawn down for the years 2018, 2019 and 2020 (to date) is set out in the following table. The LDA did not draw down significant levels of capital funding in 2018 and 2019 as the projects were at the initial pre-planning stages.

The LDA has not incurred any borrowings to date.

	Capital Allocated €	Capital Drawn Down€	Current Allocated €	Current Drawn Down€
2018	n/a	n/a	2,000,000	254,000
2019	16,500,000	467,000	3,549,000	1,941,000
2020 (to date)	13,500,000	2,500,000	4,000,000	2,714,000

Departmental Funding

1029. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the grants available to families that have a family member with a life-long disability to allow them to adapt their home aside from the housing adaption grant available through county councils; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7899/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The only private house grants of the type referred to, available through my Department, are the Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability Grant Schemes.

The Housing Adaptation Grant for People with a Disability is available to assist in the carrying out of works for eligible households, which are reasonably necessary for the purposes of rendering a private house more suitable for the accommodation of a person with a disability, including those who have enduring physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual impairments. The detailed administration of the grants, including the assessment, approval and prioritisation

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of grants to applicants under the various measures, is the responsibility of the relevant local authority.

Local Authority Rates

1030. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he will consider measures (details supplied) to bolster the tourism sector. [8026/20]

1069. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the estimated loss in revenue from commercial rates to date by Meath, Louth, Wicklow and Kildare county councils; if all rates due during Covid-19 period will be paid by his Department; the timeline for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7971/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy John Paul Phelan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1030 and 1069 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 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, 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. These costs, expected to be €260m, will be met by the Exchequer. 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.

The position following the end of the 3 month waiver 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.

The information requested regarding estimated loss of rates income to date for certain local authorities is not available in my Department.

Local Authority Funding

1031. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the details of capital grants provided to Sligo 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 that have been assessed as in need of housing support under categories (details supplied). [7079/20]

1055. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the details of capital grants provided to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council

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in 2018 and 2019 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). [7544/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1031 and 1055 together.

My Department provides funding to local authorities to support a broad range of housing programmes, including the delivery of new social housing homes through build, acquisition and leasing and programmes which support maintenance, upgrades and improvement works to existing social housing stock.

The funding provided to Sligo County Council and Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council in 2018 and 2019 in respect of the various social housing 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 tables below (in which “build” encompasses local authority and approved housing body build activity and regeneration). Funding under build programmes can vary from one year to the next depending on the stage of progress on individual projects.

In addition to capital funding provided for the categories of social housing activity referred to, it should be noted that my Department also provides capital funding for the acquisition of homes for social housing, as well as current funding for leasing homes, in addition to funding under the Housing Assistance Payment and the Rental Accommodation Scheme.

A full detailed breakdown of social housing delivery by local authority area is available on my Department’s website at the following link: <https://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 26,015 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/>.

Sligo County Council	2018 €m	2019 €m
Social Housing Build	10.1	12.76
Traveller Accommodation	0.28	1.13
Social Housing Improvement Works	0.49	0.39
Private Housing Grants	1.28	1.16
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council	2018 €m	2019 €m
Social Housing Build	25.89	10.2
Traveller Accommodation	1.1	0.08
Social Housing Improvement Works	0.48	0.46
Private Housing Grants	0.79	1.16

Rental Sector

1032. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Govern-

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ment if he will consider a process to help ensure that rents for accommodation are set at a level below the cost of a mortgage for such accommodation to facilitate persons that want to purchase their own house but are paying high rents above a normal mortgage would be for such a property and cannot save up for a deposit to buy a property; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7162/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Section 24 of the Residential Tenancies Act 2004-2019 defines market rent for the purposes of rent setting and rent review to mean, in relation to the tenancy of a dwelling, the rent which a willing tenant not already in occupation would give and a willing landlord would take for the dwelling, in each case on the basis of vacant possession being given and having regard to the other terms of the tenancy and the letting values of dwellings of a similar size, type and character to the dwelling and situated in a comparable area to that in which it is situated. Section 19 of those Acts provides that in setting a rent under a tenancy of a dwelling, the rental amount shall not exceed market rent. In a Rent Pressure Zone, a rent increase restriction of 4% per annum applies.

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 necessary.

The Government's Strategy for the Rental Sector recognised that rental inflation is the most significant challenge to security of tenure in the rental sector. To address this, the Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act 2016 provided for Rent Pressure Zones (RPZs) to moderate the rate of rent increases in those areas of the country where rents are highest and rising quickly. Currently, almost 73% of approximately 364,000 tenancies in the private rental sector are covered by RPZ designations and benefit from the rent increase restriction of 4% p.a.

In order to support more robust enforcement of the RPZ regime, the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019 provided the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) with additional powers and resources to carry out investigations and sanction landlords, if required, for any contravention of the 4% rent increase restriction in RPZs.

Ultimately, the most effective way to make rents more affordable in the medium to long term is to increase supply and accelerate delivery of housing for the private and social rental sectors. The Government is tackling housing affordability in a number of ways to help ensure that people can provide themselves with a home - whether for rent or purchase.

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 where rents only cover the cost of delivering, managing, and maintaining the homes. Cost rental lacks the profit margin involved in the private rental sector and rents are not set by the market according to supply and demand. Cost Rental represents a new form of rental tenure for Ireland and a new State intervention into the rental market.

A working group on cost rental involving my Department, the Land Development Agency (LDA), the Housing Agency, and other stakeholders, is developing the policy framework for a broad cost rental model and examining how a sustainable financing structure can be established to deliver cost rental units at the necessary scale. Detailed operational and eligibility criteria for cost rental will be informed by this evidence building and policy work. The Group's work will

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also be assisted by support, including in relation to research, which is being undertaken by the European Investment Bank (EIB) on the Group's behalf. The EIB has extensive international experience in affordable housing and is providing technical assistance in assessing the potential market for cost rental in Ireland.

Cost rental work 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 at Shanganagh in Dun Laoghaire Rathdown, where the LDA is working 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 develop from the evidence building that is currently underway.

The Government has also introduced a number of affordability measures to support people who wish to purchase their own homes. In particular, the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan, introduced with effect from 1 February 2018, enables credit-worthy first time buyers to access sustainable mortgage lending to purchase new or second-hand properties in a suitable price range. The low rate of fixed interest associated with the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan provides first time buyers with access to mortgage finance that they may not have otherwise been able to afford at a higher interest rate.

Additionally, the Help To Buy (HTB) incentive, announced in Budget 2017 and set to run until the end of 2021, is designed to assist first-time buyers with the deposit required to purchase or self-build a new house or apartment to live in as their home. The incentive provides for a refund of Income Tax and Deposit Interest Retention Tax (D.I.R.T.) paid over the previous 4 tax years, limited to a maximum of 5% of the purchase value. The HTB refund is capped at €20,000. As of 30 April 2020, a total of 18,854 HTB claims have been made, of which 18,207 are approved. The estimated total value of approved HTB claims to date is in the order of €271.4 million.

Increasing the supply of new homes at affordable prices is a key pillar of the Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan. Under Rebuilding Ireland, the Government introduced the Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund (LIHAF). The objective of the LIHAF is to provide public off-site infrastructure to relieve infrastructure blockages, thereby enabling the accelerated delivery of housing in Dublin and in other urban areas in high demand. Funding of €200m has been allocated across 30 projects over the period to 2021 and work is underway to deliver the infrastructure with an associated housing delivery of up to 20,000 units. About 40% of these homes will be sold at rates which provide a discount on market prices. More than 3,000 will be social housing homes and the remainder will be sold at market rates.

In addition, €310m is also available under the Serviced Sites Fund over the period to 2021 for infrastructure works on local authority lands that will support the delivery of housing for rent or purchase at rates which provide a significant discount on open market costs. Two calls for proposals have been made to date, which have resulted in 'Approval in Principle' being given for an allocation of c. €127m in funding for 35 projects, which will deliver some 3,200 more affordable homes. It is anticipated that a further call for proposals will issue in 2020.

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Land Development Agency

1033. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if all staff appointments and all contracts for services by the Land Development Agency have been publicly advertised and fully comply with all relevant public sector recruitment and procurement rules and guidelines; if there have been exemptions granted from such rules and guidelines; if so, when; and the reason such exemptions were granted. [7177/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The Land Development Agency 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.

The day to day management of the LDA is matter for the Chief Executive and his management team reporting to the LDA Interim Board.

In line with the Establishment Order, I, as Minister appointed the Chief Executive Officer following an open recruitment process. The terms and conditions for the post were approved by me, as Minister, with consent from the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

Under Article 7(3) of its Establishment Order (the Land Development Agency (Establishment) Order 2018, as amended by the Land Development Agency (Amendment) Order 2018), the LDA may appoint such and so many persons to be employees and under such terms and conditions as it may determine. The LDA has informed my Department that it is standard practice that the Agency publicly advertises all available positions. However, one fixed-term temporary post was recruited without public advertisement as an interim measure.

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 procurement processes.

In September 2018, prior to the LDA's establishment, a contract for financial advisory services was procured by my Department on behalf of the LDA on an interim basis without a competitive tendering process, as provided for by Regulation 32 of the European Union (Award of Public Authority Contracts) Regulations 2016 and Department of Finance Circular 40/2002. This process was approved due to the urgent need for these services to enable the Agency to carry out its functions on establishment. No further exemptions have been sought.

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.

Water and Sewerage Schemes

1034. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of the group water scheme application made by a group (details supplied); the length of time it will take to secure Ministerial sign-off; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7206/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Last year, I announced details of the measures being funded through my Department under the

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Multi-annual Rural Water Programme 2019-2021. Local Authorities were invited to submit their bids for the funding of schemes or projects in their functional areas. Galway County Council made a number of bids under Measure 4 – New Group Water Schemes – including a proposal for the project referred to. In addition to the proposed new group water scheme, the proposed project also involves amalgamation with a small existing group water scheme. The estimated cost of the proposed 229 house project was €3.98 million or €17,393 per house.

The Framework document, issued with the bids circular last year, sets out the following levels of grant aid for the various components of work envisaged under projects:

- New Group Water Schemes: Grants of up to 85% of cost are available subject to a maximum grant of €7,650 per house. This means that the effective cost limit per house is €9,000. A supplemental grant is payable for new group water schemes in exceptional cases which are subject to the recommendation of the Expert Panel appointed to examine the bids and Departmental approval.

- Amalgamation of Group Water Schemes: Works to achieve amalgamation of schemes (interconnections, new sources and water treatment, and essential water conservation and network upgrading to achieve amalgamation etc.) is funded at 100%.

The project was approved in principle, based on the recommendations of an Expert Panel established to consider proposals, when the approvals for the multi-annual programme were announced last October. This was not accompanied by a funding allocation as the Panel recommended that the estimated cost needed to be significantly reduced. Galway County Council made a detailed resubmission to my Department in relation to the project on 30 April 2020. The details of the resubmission are currently being reviewed and it is hoped that a decision will be made shortly.

Housing Assistance Payment

1035. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he will consider increasing the homeless HAP rate payable for County Wicklow to bring it in line with the Dublin homeless HAP rate. [7261/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Maximum rent limits for the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) scheme are set for each housing authority area by the Housing Assistance Payment (Amendment) Regulations 2017, which are available on the Irish Statute Book website at the following link: <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/si/56/made/en/print?q=housing&years=2017>.

The HAP limits were agreed in conjunction with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP). In reviewing rent limits, the Department worked closely with the DEASP and monitored data gathered from the Residential Tenancies Board and the HAP Shared Services Centre. The new rent limits set in the Regulations involved reflected significant increases on previous limits, in the order of 60% in some areas.

Local authorities also 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 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.

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At end 2019, 42.7% of the total number of households being supported by HAP were benefiting from the additional flexibility. When the additional discretion available to homeless households in the Dublin region is removed, 36.0% of households nationally were benefiting from the additional flexibility. In those cases, the average rate of discretionary payment being used was 16.6% above rent limits provided. This increases to 22.5% when the Dublin region homeless area data is included. Wicklow County Council used discretion in 28.3% of HAP tenancies and the average level of discretion applied by Wicklow County Council was 16.5%.

HAP rent limits are kept under constant review, as is the use of discretion by local authorities, and the data indicates that there is no need to increase the rent limits at this time. I am also conscious that any such increase could have negative inflationary impacts, leading to a detrimental impact on the wider rental market, including for those households who are not receiving HAP support.

I am satisfied that the current maximum rent limits, together with the additional flexibility available to local authorities, are generally sufficient to support the effective operation of the HAP scheme. However, I will continue to keep the matter under review.

Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund

1036. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 1215 and 1249 of 13 May 2020, if the cost reduced or more affordable ten homes in Ratoath, County Meath were purchased by Meath County Council; if so, the price paid per unit by the local authority; and the price they were they sold to homeowners for by unit. [7298/20]

1040. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 1215 and 1249 of 13 May 2020, the average amount the 459 cost reduced and more affordable units in Adamstown SDZ, County Dublin sold for by unit. [7302/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1036 and 1040 together.

The sales prices of the individual homes delivered following the construction of LIHAF grant funded facilitating infrastructure are not systematically collated by my Department.

However, in the case of the 10 homes referred to in the Ratoath LIHAF project, I can confirm that the agreement between Meath County Council and the developer allows for a 10% discount on the open market selling price of comparable units in the development. The comparable units are priced between €288,464 and €332,500. The homes were made available on an application basis to first time buyers on income levels not exceeding €50,000 for a single person and €75,000 for a dual income household. The market price is the price that was agreed between the developer and Meath County Council, of which the LIHAF 10% reduction was applied, in order to reach the more affordable/cost reduced price. The Council has confirmed it is currently progressing the Section 183 disposal for six of the units, a process which was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In respect of the more affordable/cost reduced homes being delivered in the Adamstown SDZ, South Dublin County Council has advised that a Development Agreement was signed by the Council and the developers in February 2018 and subsequently amended through a Deed of Variation in February 2019. This provides that 800 residential units will be made available for sale to persons meeting the local authority's criteria at the time of sale to qualify for affordable

housing, of which 300 will be at €300,000 or less and 500 at €320,000 or less.

Social and Affordable Housing

1037. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 1215 and 1249 of 13 May 2020, the reason no Part V or no Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund discounted homes have been delivered to date in Carrigaline, County Cork. [7299/20]

1038. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 1248 and 1256 of 13 May 2020, the reason less than the 10% required of Part V units were delivered in Oldtown and Mooretown, Fingal, County Dublin; and the average amount the 211 cost reduced and more affordable units sold for by unit. [7300/20]

1039. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 1248 and 1256 of 13 May 2020, the reason less than 10% required of Part V units were delivered in Naas, County Kildare; and the average amount the 150 cost reduced and more affordable units sold for by unit. [7301/20]

1041. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 1248 and 1256 of 13 May 2020, the reason no Part V homes have been delivered to date in Glanmire, Cork city. [7303/20]

1042. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 1248 and 1256 of 13 May 2020, the reason no Part V homes have been delivered to date in Donabate, Fingal, County Dublin. [7304/20]

1043. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 1248 and 1256 of 13 May 2020, the reason no Part V homes have been delivered to date in Mungret, County Limerick. [7305/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1037 to 1039, inclusive, and 1041 to 1043, inclusive, together.

The construction of housing by developers on lands which benefit from Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund (LIHAF) funding is separate from the local authority-led delivery of the infrastructure, both contractually and in terms of delivery schedules.

While it is a matter for individual local authorities to manage the procurement and delivery of their capital projects, by necessity the construction of housing, to a significant extent, generally commences later in the overall development process than the LIHAF-funded facilitating infrastructure. Housing is generally delivered on a phased basis and the sites referred to are the subject of active and ongoing construction programmes.

In relation to the homes delivered and linked to the construction of LIHAF grant funded facilitating infrastructure, individual sales prices are not systematically collated by my Department. However, in respect of the more affordable/cost reduced homes, Kildare County Council has advised that, in relation to the 150 homes linked to the Naas LIHAF project, the relevant Development Agreement provided for a cost reduction of €7,500 per unit on the open market value. As part of the Oldtown/Mooretown project, Fingal County Council has confirmed that the agreement provides that in addition to 10% social housing, the open market value of remaining units would have a cost reduction on open market values of €2,500.

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In respect of Part V homes generally, the Planning and Development Act 2000 requires that 10% of any development be made available for social housing. Local authorities will ensure adherence to statutory obligations and the sites in question will deliver on this requirement in the overall period up to completion. In some cases, the required level of 10% will be exceeded. The planned number of homes for each LIHAF project and the associated homes to be delivered under Part V are set out in the Table below.

Local Authority	LIHAF Project	Planned units	Part V Units
Fingal Co Co	Oldtown/Mooretown	800	80
Fingal Co Co	Donabate	1200	160
Cork County Co	Carrigaline	400	40
Kildare Co Co	Naas	800	142
Cork City Co	Glanmire	300	30
Limerick C&C Co	Mungret	399	60

Details of the LIHAF projects by local authority area, budget allocation, project description and projected housing delivery are available on the Rebuilding Ireland website at the following link: www.rebuildingireland.ie/LIHAF.

Question No. 1040 answered with Question No. 1036.

Questions Nos. 1041 to 1043, inclusive, answered with Question No. 1037.

EU Directives

1044. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of efforts to comply with the European Drinking Water Directive; and his plans to take appropriate action further to the issuing of the reasoned opinion by the European Commission on Ireland's alleged non-compliance with the directive since 2003. [7369/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The objective of the Drinking Water Directive is to protect human health and to ensure that drinking water is wholesome and clean.

The EPA consistently reports that quality of public water supplies is very good at a national level. Irish Water is continuing to invest in solving the remaining priority issues, with a particular focus on improving the reliability and resilience of our public water system.

I also recognise that Ireland's private supplies, which serve up to a fifth of our population, must be appropriately protected and improved. This forms a core objective of the Government's investment in rural water supplies and forms part of the review of rural water services that is currently underway. Sustained investment in Ireland's public and private water sector is essential.

On 19 July 2018, the European Commission issued a Letter of Formal Notice to Ireland citing 73 public drinking water supplies and 24 private group water schemes each with elevated concentrations of a group of disinfection by-product chemicals called trihalomethanes (THMs). These chemicals are formed during disinfection when raw waters have high levels of natural organic material.

Ireland's response to the Letter of Formal Notice on 19 October 2018 highlighted plans for investment to resolve this issue in each supply by upgrading and improving treatment processes

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and outlined the significant progress that had already been made in addressing excess THM formation in both public and private water supplies. This was followed up by a further progress report to the Commission in May 2019. On 14 May 2020, the Commission escalated the infringement and issued a 'Reasoned Opinion' to Ireland regarding a failure to fulfil obligations under Articles 4 of Directive 98/83/EC on drinking water.

The 2018 Letter of Formal Notice had raised the issue of informing, advising and notifying consumers under Article 8(3) and (7) of the Drinking Water Directive. The Commission has decided, having assessed Ireland's reply, to not to pursue allegations under these provisions in the Reasoned Opinion.

The Commission now states Ireland has infringed the requirements of the Directive in relation to 31 public water supplies and in 13 private group water schemes, with regard to elevated concentrations of THMs, failing to take remedial action as soon as possible, and failing to give priority to its enforcement action.

The EPA's Remedial Action List for public water supplies is published on a quarterly basis. The most recent update relates to Q1 2020, and shows that of the 31 public water supply zones named in the Reasoned Opinion, a further 13 are now compliant with the THM parameters. Information in relation to the status of the private group water schemes is currently being compiled in my Department.

My Department is working closely with Irish Water, the EPA, local authorities and the National Federation of Group Water Schemes to develop a comprehensive reply to the Reasoned Opinion, outlining the progress already made and a programme of works to address excess THMs in the remaining 18 water supply zones and the private group water schemes in the shortest practicable timeframe.

Irish Water continues to develop and implement a long-term investment perspective in order to strategically address the deficiencies in the public water and waste water system. Building water and waste water treatment plants, as well as upgrading or building new water and waste water networks, requires significant and sustained investment. The National Development Plan 2018-2027 provides for significant investment in public water and wastewater infrastructure over the course of the plan to ensure the continued operation, repair and upgrading of Ireland's water and waste water infrastructure to support social and economic development across the State and ensure compliance with EU Directives.

Property Registration Authority

1045. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the steps he will take to ensure that the Property Registration Authority resumes processing pending applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7392/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The Property Registration Authority has commenced upscaling its operations on a gradual basis in line with COVID-19 recovery planning. As part of a phased recovery plan, 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 increase.

Applications are being dealt with in order of priority. However, urgent applications are being processed expeditiously, as requested, on a case by case basis.

The upscaling of operations will continue to be reviewed and implemented in line with

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recovery planning, the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business and all public health guidance.

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 any specific case may be obtained by contacting the specific e-mail address in respect of the PRA, reps@prai.ie.

Local Authority Leases

1046. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the breakdown of the 1,161 long-term social housing leased units delivered in 2019 by type (details supplied); the average annual cost of each lease type; and the full net present cost of each lease type over the full duration of the agreed lease. [7399/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Of the 50,000 social housing homes to be delivered under Rebuilding Ireland, over 10,000 homes are targeted to be leased by local authorities and approved housing bodies under leasing arrangements from a range of different sources, including direct leasing by local authorities and approved housing bodies; rental availability agreements; the Repair and Leasing Scheme; the Mortgage to Rent Scheme, and Enhanced Leasing. The exact blend of delivery under leasing in any given year will depend on the availability of existing stock and new homes in particular. Leasing is funded under the Social Housing Current Expenditure Programme (SHCEP), which also meets the current costs of dwellings delivered by approved housing bodies under the Capital Advance Leasing Facility (CALF) and Housing Agency Acquisitions Programmes. There is no Lease to Buy scheme in the Department's leasing programme.

Data in relation to the 1,161 leased dwellings delivered in 2019, broken down by local authority and lease type, is published on my Department's website at the following link:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordable/overall-social-housing-provision>

Details of the average annual cost of each lease type are set out in the Table below. The average cost is calculated based on claims for operational new units submitted by local authorities and recorded on my Department's SHCEP financial management system at end 2019. No payments were made by my Department for Enhanced Leasing units in 2019 but the estimated average annual lease cost for 2020 for the 113 units delivered under the Enhanced Leasing Scheme is €22,221.

Table: Average Lease Cost 2019 by Lease Type

-	Average Annual Cost by Lease Type
LA lease from private owner	€10,696
AHB Lease from private owner	€8,349
MTR (AHB and Private)	€10,144
NAMA SPV	€16,726
RLS (LA and AHB)	€5,666

My Department does not carry out Net Present Cost (NPC) calculations for different lease types as a whole in any particular year. This is because lease duration will have a strong impact

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on the calculation and, of the 1,161 leases referred to above, there are varying lease terms. In addition, many of the projects are located in areas that have different cost and income inputs attached and all have varying degrees of operational risk and responsibility attached. NPC calculations are used to examine competing options for a specific project or investment on specific sites, and are not deemed applicable as a comparator across multiple lease types on very different sites.

Housing Data

1047. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the breakdown of the 6,074 social housing builds in 2019 by category (details supplied); and the average price paid or approved by his Department for each category. [7400/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): 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-affordable/overall-social-housing-provision>

This data provides a breakdown of social housing delivery across the range of mechanisms referred to. 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 6,074 homes were delivered through Local Authority new build, Local Authority Part V, Local Authority turnkey, AHB new build and Voids. The breakdown is as follows:

Category	Total number of Homes
LA new build (including Regeneration)	1,152
LA Turnkey	1,119
LA Part V	589
AHB New Build	2,174
AHB Part V	737
Voids (capped at Rebuilding Ireland target)	303

It should be noted that while delivery in excess of the Rebuilding Ireland capped Voids target is not included in the delivery against LA build target data, in total my Department supported local authorities to bring over 1,500 vacant homes back into active use under the Voids programme in 2019. When combined with the many other properties that local authorities upgrade and refit using own funding, this programme is a valuable additional assistance to maximise the potential for build activity to bring vacant or derelict properties back into productive use.

While statistics have been collated in relation to delivery, a unit c

ost analysis across individual programmes for 2019 has not yet been completed.

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Local Authority Housing

1048. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the breakdown of the 2,772 acquired social houses in 2019 by local authority; the average price paid or approved by his Department for each local authority area; and the breakdown of the properties in terms of those purchased with a tenant in situ and those purchased vacant. [7401/20]

1049. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of the 2,772 social housing acquisitions by local authorities in 2019 that resulted in the issuing of a notice to quit to a sitting tenant as a result of the purchase. [7402/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1048 and 1049 together.

My Department provides funding to local authorities to acquire a range of properties for social housing use. Identifying and undertaking such social housing acquisitions is largely delegated to local authorities, so that they may respond flexibly to all opportunities to provide new social housing. As the housing authority for its area, it is a matter for each local authority, in the first instance, to determine the suitability of any units for acquisition.

A breakdown by local authority area of the 2,772 social homes delivered through local authority and approved housing body acquisitions in 2019, is available on my Department's website at the following link: https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/social_housing_delivery_by_local_authority_2019.xlsx. While statistics have been collated in relation to delivery, a unit cost analysis across individual programmes for 2019 has not yet been completed.

My Department does not hold specific data from local authorities and approved housing bodies on whether individual properties they acquire are vacant or whether a 'notice to quit' has arisen. However, the normal approach is to acquire properties with vacant possession (indeed, by way of example, the Housing Agency Acquisitions Fund is specifically targeted at such properties on the portfolios of financial institutions); in rare situations where a property is acquired with a sitting tenant, it would generally involve a social housing tenant where the tenancy will be maintained.

Planning Guidelines

1050. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of the proposed use it or lose it planning permission that he indicated he planned to introduce to address the issue of developers in receipt of strategic housing developments planning permission using the permission for speculative gain rather than residential development. [7403/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Under the Government's Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan on Housing and Homelessness, the Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act 2016 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 for determination.

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The recent review of the Strategic Housing Development arrangements highlighted that while they have generally been a success in providing a fast-track development consent process for developers of large-scale housing developments, the number of SHD permissions that have commenced development is less than might have been expected. Having reflected on the views of the Review Group on the rate of activation of SHD sites, it is considered appropriate that developers should be sufficiently motivated to commence development on foot of an SHD permission in a timely manner, given the efficiencies that the SHD arrangements provide.

Therefore, I indicated that I considered that it would be appropriate to introduce a “use it or lose it” measure requiring developers to have commenced a certain level of development within a certain period of time on foot of a grant of an SHD planning permission. My Department has been developing proposals in this regard, the further advancement of which will be considered in context of the legislative programme of the incoming Government.

Electoral Process

1051. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the basis for and the origin of the instruction to commence planning and preparation for elections and referenda in the context of the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7424/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The preparation and management of electoral events is a key part of the ongoing business planning work of the Franchise Unit in my Department. Earlier this year, when the extent of the COVID-19 virus became evident, officials in the Franchise Unit commenced scenario planning for the conduct of any electoral event where COVID-19 type restrictions might be in place. This included carrying out an initial assessment of all elements of the electoral process where issues might arise.

Such scenario planning is good practice and is also necessary to ensure that appropriate arrangements for the conduct of electoral events can be put in place if a pandemic is ongoing.

As Minister with overall responsibility for electoral law, I engaged with the Franchise Unit to ensure that the necessary scenario planning was being undertaken. Such engagement between officials and Ministers is standard practice across all policy areas in my Department.

Fire Service

1052. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans to establish a facility (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7435/20]

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

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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.

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 runs a national training programme for fire services which provides an annual programme of courses for local authority fire service officers, supporting fire authorities in delivering efficient and effective fire and rescue services. The programme is delivered through a number of regional training centres and this has proved to be an effective and efficient approach over many years. My Department continues to support capital developments in these regional training centres and regards them as a more effective service delivery model rather than a single dedicated site, considering the fire service training needs, numbers of personnel and geographical considerations across the country. There are currently no plans to develop a national training centre.

I understand that Limerick City and County Council has acquired a large industrial site adjacent to the fire station in Kilmallock with plans to develop a training centre there. My Department has requested a detailed proposal from the Council.

Local Authority Funding

1053. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the funding made available to local authorities in 2020 in terms of returning vacant housing units to council housing stock making them available for allocation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7454/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Under Section 58 of the Housing Act 1966, the management and maintenance of local authority housing stock, including pre-letting repairs to vacant properties, responsive repairs and implementing planned maintenance programmes, is a matter for each individual local authority. Since 2014, my Department has provided funding for this purpose through the Voids Programme.

In relation to allocations under the Voids Programme this year, a two stage approach is envisaged for voids funding in 2020, as follows;

1. An initial call for proposal for COVID-19 Voids funding for vacant units which are required for the emergency accommodation of social housing support qualified households arising from the need to prevent, limit, minimise or slow the spread of COVID-19. This call for proposals will issue this week.

2. A second call for proposals under the normal voids programme will issue when all emergency COVID-19 voids submissions have been processed.

Notwithstanding the absence of a formal voids allocation to date for 2020, local authorities are aware of the approach for this year and have been advised to push on with the remediation of vacant stock. The value of payments already made this year and claims on hand with my Department would confirm that local authorities are, as requested, pressing ahead with this important work.

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Student Accommodation

1054. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans to meet representatives of private landlords to discuss the issue of students' rent not being returned despite the fact they are no longer in need of the lease due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7515/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): 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, other than in exceptional circumstances, during this period. Initially, these emergency laws will apply for a period of 3 months, but they may be extended if the Government considers it necessary.

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.

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.

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, or to meet with anyone that may be party to a dispute lodged with the RTB.

I understand that the Department of Education and Skills is working with representatives from the higher education sector to address the challenges faced by students in this difficult

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time. The Department of Education of Skills 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. The Minister for Education and Skills has indicated that he would wish to see this principle applied in the case of students who were residing in privately owned student accommodation. However, it is not within the remit of the Department of Education and Skills nor of my Department to direct any accommodation provider to offer a refund.

Question No. 1055 answered with Question No. 1031.

Traveller Community

1056. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the reason supports for Travellers outlined in a circular to local authorities have not been implemented in full (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7556/20]

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. It is a matter for each local authority to assess the adequacy of provisions on sites (both authorised and unauthorised) and implement measures as necessary, taking into consideration advice from the HSE, fire safety guidelines, local area plans, public procurement guidelines and any other considerations relevant to their area.

In response to the COVID-19 health emergency, I and my Department have engaged with local authorities and Traveller representative groups to put a responsive plan in place to address identified and emerging health risks to the Traveller population nationwide, particularly as some members of the Traveller community, such as those living on sites with limited facilities, may be particularly vulnerable. My Department is in regular contact with the local authorities and is ensuring that funding approvals, where appropriate, are granted as a matter of priority.

Housing Adaptation Grant

1057. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if funding for the housing adaption grant for persons with a disability and older persons have been allocated to Roscommon County Council and Galway County Council; if not, when funding will be made available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7601/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Notification of the 2020 funding allocations in respect of the Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability will issue to all local authorities, including Roscommon County Council and Galway County Council, shortly.

In the interim, all local authorities have been advised that they can spend up to 65% of their 2019 allocation. This interim funding provision allows all local authorities to continue approving applications and making payments to successful grant applicants, pending the notification of the full year 2020 allocations.

Vacant Properties

1058. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of unoccupied social housing stock in County Wexford and in each county council in tabular form. [7627/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Local authorities will always have a level of vacancy in their housing stock and this will fluctuate over time, as tenancy surrender and re-letting of stock is an ongoing process.

My Department actively encourages local authorities to ensure all vacant properties in their stock are brought back into use as expeditiously as possible. Since 2014, funding has been provided for this purpose under the Voids Programme and the suite of works being funded is tailored to encourage swift turnaround. Local authorities also provide significant funding from their own resources to address the level of vacancy within the social housing stock.

The National Oversight & Audit Commission (NOAC) reviews the social housing stock level in local authorities every year, including the number of vacant local authority houses at a particular point in time. NOAC's activities in this regard are published in its Annual Performance Indicator Reports. The most recent report, relating to 2018, is available on the NOAC website and can be accessed at the following link (see Appendix 2): <http://noac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/NOAC-Performance-Indicator-Report-2018-1.pdf>.

Local Authority Housing

1059. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if county councils will be instructed to decrease the turnover time of houses to within at least a three month period (details supplied). [7628/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Under Section 58 of the Housing Act 1966, the management and maintenance of local authority housing stock, including pre-letting repairs to vacant properties, responsive repairs and implementing planned maintenance programmes, is a matter for each individual local authority.

Since 2014, my Department has provided funding for this purpose through the Voids Programme. The suite of works now being funded under the Voids Programme is tailored to facilitate quicker turnaround times. Local authorities are encouraged, where possible, to limit pre-letting works to only those required to ensure that the dwellings to be re-let meet the minimum standards required under the Standards for Private Rented Dwellings Regulations 2019.

There is a commitment under Rebuilding Ireland that local authorities will introduce a planned maintenance approach to the management of their housing stock. Under this approach, it is intended that major upgrade works required to the stock would be scheduled as part of an informed programme of works and not carried out as part of pre-letting works, as this can extend turnaround times. The move to a planned maintenance approach to the management of the social housing stock is central to the requirement for the quick turnaround of vacant units and my Department is involved in ongoing discussions on this important piece of work with the City & County Management Association.

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1060. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if a local authority plans to purchase a house in the functional area of another local authority for the provision of social housing, if it is the reserved function of the local authority elected members in the local authority area in which the house is located to ratify the purchase of the house before it takes place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7764/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Section 109 of the Housing Act 1966 provides for the exercise by a housing authority of functions under the Act outside its functional area. The section also provides that the authority by whom the function is intended to be performed, and the other authority, may make and carry out an agreement in relation to the function. Where such an agreement is made, this is a reserved function.

Cycling Facilities Funding

1061. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if an allocation has been made to Kildare County Council for a recycling facility in Celbridge, County Kildare; if so, when same occurred; the amount involved; if not, the outstanding issues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7786/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I have no function in relation to recycling, waste policy generally or the funding of infrastructure in that regard. At a national level, responsibility for waste policy rests with my colleague, the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment. Waste management infrastructure provision at a local level is the responsibility of local authorities under Part II of the Waste Management Act 1996 (as amended).

Architects Register

1062. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he will consider the implementation of the recommendations of the report of the Joint Committee on Environment, Culture and the Gaeltacht, entitled “Report of the Committee on the Title of Architect”; if consideration will be given to recommendations 1 and 7 for the inclusion of a grandfather clause and that formal qualifications under Irish legislation for registration as an architect not exceed the formal qualifications required for mutual recognition under the relevant European directive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7815/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): 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/environmenttransportcultureandthegaeltacht/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.

Under EU law there is no harmonised standard of competence for architecture; however 11 competencies are specified under Article 46 of *Directive 2005/36/EC on the mutual recognition of professional qualifications*. The standard of education and professional practice requirements varies across Member States. Section 14(5) of the Building Control Act 2007 requires that training programmes and qualifications relating to architecture must however relate to the Article 46 competencies.

The *Irish Standard of Knowledge, Skill and Competence for Practice as an Architect* was developed in 2005 by the RIAI, in consultation with industry stakeholders. It is included in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) maintained by Quality & Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

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.

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Property Registration

1063. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if his attention has been drawn to a backlog in registrations in the Land Registry; the remote working arrangements if such a delay is holding up the sale of a property; if there is a system of expediting a particular case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7822/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): 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.

The gradual upscaling of services 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.

The number of transactions on hand in the PRA increased from 102,805 at the end of February 2020 to 113,866 at the end of April 2020. It is anticipated that 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.

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.

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 any specific case may be obtained by contacting the specific e-mail address in respect of the PRA, reps@prai.ie.

An Bord Pleanála

1064. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he envisages a backlog in planning applications and appeals to An Bord Pleanála; and the steps his Department has taken to ensure that An Bord Pleanála has the adequate resources to deal with such a backlog should it arise. [7839/20]

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 (the Planning Act), extending the duration of all relevant periods and timelines specified in planning legislation by a cumulative total of 56 days/8 weeks. This was done to maintain the integrity of the planning system and to ensure that public participation requirements therein are not diminished.

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The expiration of the third Order on 23 May 2020 means 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.

During the period of the three Orders, An Bord Pleanála (the Board) has remained open for business, accepting applications, appeals and observations. The Board has continued to make decisions regarding Strategic Infrastructure Developments, Strategic Housing Developments (where for example, it made decisions on 11 cases in April 2020, the same number of decisions as in the corresponding month in 2019, ensuring that decisions were made in all cases within the mandatory 16 week decision timeline), vacant site levy appeals and normal planning appeals where the public participation process involved was complete prior to the making of the first Order under section 251A of the Planning Act.

Following on from the Government's Roadmap for Re-Opening Society and Business published on 1 May last, and the subsequent resumption of activity in the construction sector from 18 May last under Phase 1 of the Roadmap, I decided not to recommend to Government the further extension of the recent COVID-19 related Orders under section 251A of the Planning Act. This has enabled the re-opening of planning authority offices and the phased resumption of planning operations in accordance with public health guidance and relevant return to work protocols from earlier this week i.e. 25 May.

In light of this, decision making processes under the planning system, including those requiring public participation, are now beginning to be advanced again.

My Department has worked with planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála during the period of the COVID-19 restrictions with a view to ensuring that work was progressed on planning files to the fullest extent possible, thereby facilitating the smooth resumption and delivery of planning services on return to work and minimising the build-up of any backlogs. The Board has not indicated the necessity for any additional resources at this time.

County Development Plans

1065. **Deputy Thomas Byrne** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the specific guidance he will provide to local authorities that are required to hold statutory meetings that are open to members of the public to consider their proposed county development plans, which are currently under review. [7841/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): My Department has taken a number of important steps in response to the current COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that our planning system continues to operate in a manner that will ensure public participation throughout the period of public health restrictions.

On 29 March 2020, following on from the statement by An Taoiseach on 27 March 2020, which asked people generally to stay at home other than for certain essential activities, and taking account of the considerations under Section 251A(5) of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, the Government, at my request, made an Order which extended a range of specified/appropriate periods and timelines under the Act, and a number of other related Planning Acts and associated regulations. A number of further Orders were made subsequently, the

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combined effect of which meant that such periods were ultimately extended in duration from 29 March 2020 to 23 May 2020 inclusive, comprising a total period of eight weeks (56 days).

While it was decided not to further extend the Section 251A Order after 23 May, the additional period of eight weeks carries forward into all statutory planning processes and is applicable to county development plans.

The agreed programme between my Department and the City & County Management Association (CCMA) for the phased re-establishing of local authority services has identified county/city development plan activities as restarting in Phase 4 of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. Accordingly, a majority of planning authorities now intend commencing or re-commencing their statutory development plan preparation processes, subject to the extended eight week period, resulting in a series of new public consultation and plan display exercises from late Summer and into the Autumn.

The county/city development plan procedure includes public participation as a central part of the plan-making process with specified requirements for public display and consultation. Planning authorities engage with the public through a wide range of different channels and media, including written documentation and submissions, online content and face-to-face forums which often build on established business and community engagement activities and networks.

As part of these public participation exercises, there is a statutory requirement to hold public meetings at the initial county/city development plan consultation stage. While such events can involve large public meetings at a limited number of venues, more recent practices have centred around a workshop format where individuals in small groups can more easily and comfortably have the opportunity to articulate their opinion and to contribute to the plan making process.

A specific Working Group has been convened by my Department and the CCMA to examine the particular COVID-19 issues impacting on the operation of the planning system. This Working Group has met on a number of occasions in relation to the reopening of planning services in a manner that is in accordance with public health restrictions and also provides for public participation. This work has initially concentrated on the development management function, relating to planning applications and associated services.

The Working Group will subsequently be focusing on issues concerning the preparation of statutory development plans by the local authorities, including county/city development plans. It is intended that this will inform the local government sector in fulfilling statutory and administrative obligations in the development plan process in a manner that is both safe and accessible.

Building Regulations

1066. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the reason the Building Regulations Advisory Body was not consulted regarding recent changes to the building regulations technical guidance document for fire safety (details supplied); when the Building Regulations Advisory Body was last convened; when a meeting will be convened; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7847/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): Section 14 of the Building Control Act 1990 provides for the establishment, at the Minister's discretion, of a Building Regulations Advisory Body (BRAB) to advise the Minister on matters relating to building regulations.

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The term of office of the last BRAB expired on 1 October 2012. The members of that BRAB were appointed for a term of office of five years from 14 June 2007 to 13 June 2012. A temporary extension to 1 October 2012 was granted to the existing members in light of the Building Control (Amendment) Regulations which were at an advanced stage of development at that time.

In accordance with Appendix IIb of the Government's Public Service Reform Plan, published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in November 2011, the BRAB was listed as one of the forty six "Candidate Bodies for Critical Review by end June 2012". The outcome of that review process was that the work of the Building Regulations Advisory Body was to be absorbed into my Department. I have no plans to establish a new BRAB at this time.

In relation to Ireland's evacuation policy, the Fire Safety Task Force established in the aftermath of the Grenfell tragedy, in its report of May 2018, highlights evacuation of buildings as the default policy in Ireland. This is distinctly different from the "stay put" policy in other countries. The Report also states "The key to life safety in all apartment buildings is a proper two-stage fire detection and alarm system, together with an evacuation strategy...".

In regard to the recent changes to the Building Regulations technical guidance document for fire safety, Part B and Technical Guidance Document (TGD) B of the Building Regulations deal with fire safety issues. Part B of the Second Schedule of the Building Regulations sets the legal performance requirements of buildings and the associated TGD B provides guidance on how to achieve that performance for common building types. Where works are carried out in accordance with the guidance in TGD B, this will, prima facie, indicate compliance with Part B.

The design of apartments in Ireland has been evolving over recent years, as design teams learn from best practice around the world. In particular, open plan apartments are becoming increasingly popular. TGD B 2006 did not provide specific guidance on open plan apartment arrangements. In 2018, following liaison with Dublin Fire Brigade (DFB), a working group of experts from DFB and my Department was set up to examine the issue of open plan apartments in Ireland and develop appropriate guidance.

All proposed changes to the Building Regulations or amendments to TGDs are formally notified to the European Commission and are subject to a public consultation process and a Regulatory Impact Analysis. The recent additional guidance to TGD B 2006 is no different, in that a draft was published for public consultation from 23 June 2019 to 23 August 2019.

A significant number of submissions were received from individuals, fire safety consultants, housing providers, other organisations and local authorities. My Department carefully evaluated all 39 submissions received, which included approximately 400 comments. In addition, a number of meetings took place with stakeholders such as local authority fire officers, fire safety consultants and construction industry stakeholders.

In developing the additional guidance, standards, tests and engineering approaches were considered and fire safety requirements in a number of jurisdictions, including England, Scotland, the USA, Australia, Denmark and Hong Kong, were reviewed.

The additional guidance amending TGD B 2006 published in February 2020 has a number of provisions for buildings containing apartments and includes a new section specifying provisions for open plan apartments. In relation to internal layouts and provisions for open plan apartments with travel distances exceeding 9m, the guidance provides for -

- sprinkler protection within the apartment to control fire development;
- maximum travel distances within the apartment of 20m;

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- single storey apartments only;
- an enhanced fire detection and alarm systems within the apartment;
- interconnected alarms in circulation areas, bedrooms and high risk areas to ensure early detection and warning of a fire; and
- enclosed kitchens or a distance of 1.8m from the main kitchen cooking appliances to the escape route, which is in line with international research and testing.

For smaller apartments, with travel distances less than or equal to 9m, the guidance in TGD B has not changed. TGD B has referenced BS 5588 Part 1: 1990 since the introduction of Building Regulations in 1991, and this continues to be applicable. In these apartments, the travel distances from the apartment entrance door to any point in any habitable room cannot exceed 9m, no habitable room can be an inner room, and the position of any cooking facilities should be remote from the dwelling entrance door and not prejudice the escape route from any point in the apartment. This typically applies to small studio type flats with open internal layouts.

The additional guidance provides that an escape route from a bedroom cannot be through a kitchen in a non-sprinklered apartment, as no habitable room can be an inner room in accordance with BS 5588 Part 1: 1990, as currently referenced in TGD B. Furthermore, the existing provisions of BS 5588-1:1990 clearly indicate that escape from flats with a floor more than 4.5m above ground level should be via common protected corridors/lobbies and protected stairways, not via escape windows. While this does not consider windows to be suitable for escape, it does not preclude the use of windows for rescue.

It should be noted that the additional guidance also addresses other aspects of fire safety for buildings containing apartments and this is set out at the beginning of reprint TGD B 2020. All of the guidance in TGD B (Reprint 2020) should be considered collectively, as fire safety must be addressed in a holistic manner, considering building resilience and ensuring a building is safe for occupant egress and firefighter operations simultaneously.

Technical Guidance Document B - Fire Safety (2006) (Reprint 2020) and a Background Note on Recent Changes to Part B and TGD B of the Building Regulations are available on my Department's website at:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/building-standards/tgd-part-b-fire-safety/technical-guidance-document-b-fire-safety>.

Rental Accommodation Scheme

1067. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the operational guidelines that exist for local authorities in respect of their administration of the rental accommodation scheme; the specific rules that local authorities must abide by in terms of the date that the scheme is payable by them, that is, from the date of application or the date of award; if the latter, the reason for this; and the rules or guidelines in place if there is a significant processing delay by the local authority. [7849/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Local authorities are responsible for the detailed planning of social housing provision based on the households needs in their respective areas. It is a matter for each local authority to identify the appropriate initiatives to respond to identified housing need. This includes consideration of options to build, acquire or lease properties, as well as the provision of housing supports

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through the private rental sector, including through the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS). The allocation of social housing support to qualified households is, in the first instance, a matter for the local authority concerned, in accordance with its allocation scheme made in accordance with section 22 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and its associated Regulations.

RAS has been an important contributor to social housing supply since its introduction on a pilot basis in 2005. RAS involves a three-way relationship between (1) the housing authority and landlord - where the local authority enters into a contractual arrangement with the property owner to make the property available to the housing authority under the RAS scheme for an agreed term and at an agreed rent; (2) the landlord and tenant - where the eligible RAS tenant, nominated by the housing authority, signs a residential tenancy agreement with the landlord; and (3) the housing authority and tenant - where the RAS tenant pays a differential rent to the local authority and the local authority makes payments to the landlord on the tenant's behalf. The availability agreement signed by the landlord and the local authority sets out the commencement date for that agreement and would therefore be the date from which rent is payable to the landlord by the local authority, subject to all conditions of the availability agreement being complied with.

If the Deputy can provide additional information in relation to any particular form of delay that he is concerned about, I will endeavour to have the matter explored further.

Social and Affordable Housing

1068. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the percentage requirements for social and affordable homes on the Colbert Station quarter development by the Land Development Agency in Limerick city as directed by his Department; the cost of phase 2 of the quarter; the cost of the panel of eight architects; the person or body they are employed by; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7855/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): The Land Development Agency (LDA), in partnership with Limerick City and County Council, CIÉ and the HSE, has commissioned a Design Review for the redevelopment of a brownfield mixed-use 75 hectare site at Colbert Station, Limerick. The exact housing mix will not be determined until the design of the site is fully completed. Alongside the establishment of the LDA in September 2018, the Government approved a new public land affordability requirement. Under this requirement, a minimum of 30% of any housing developed on State-owned lands must be reserved for affordable housing purposes, in addition to the 10% statutory social housing requirement under Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000.

On the basis of information provided by the LDA to my Department, I can indicate that the project is currently in phase 1. As such, no financial planning for phase 2 has been undertaken as of yet as this is largely contingent on the results presented by the design review in phase 1.

The commissioning of architectural or other expertise in relation to individual projects is a matter for the LDA itself. In that context, as is the case 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.

Question No. 1069 answered with Question No. 1030.

1070. **Deputy Michael McGrath** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if an analysis has been carried out by his Department on the impact on productivity in the construction sector as a result of Covid-19 restrictions and social distancing; the impact in terms of input costs; the way in which that will impact the viability of housing and apartment projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8003/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): As most construction sites only commenced remobilisation from 18 May 2020, in light of the Government Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, it is too early estimate with any accuracy the potential costs of the safe working practices required in line with the Return to Work Safely Protocol; COVID-19 Specific National Protocol for Employers and Workers, and their impact on the viability of housing and apartment projects.

While practically all housing relation construction activity had ceased from 27th March 2020, as the Deputy will be aware, a number of construction projects delivering urgent essential homes were activated during the period of restrictions. One of the key criteria to achieve designation under the above process was that where works were proposed, the Contractor employed by the local authority or the Approved Housing Body was required to confirm that they could undertake the works in accordance with HSE and Government COVID-19-related public health guidelines and recommendations. Another criteria was that these projects were, for the most part, practically complete, with minor final snagging, landscaping, paving and external works to be completed.

The activation of these sites gave both the construction site teams and the contracting body- either the local authority or Approved Housing Body- an opportunity to practically implement some of the concepts that were being prepared across the board by the Sector working with Government on standard operating procedures and to feedback to their representative organisation. It also allowed for a level of readiness to commence other activity on non-essential sites. While the earlier activation might also provide some slightly earlier indication of the additional costs arising, the real impact on programmes, costs and productivity will vary from site to site and the stage of development (commencement or near completion).

This view has been underscored in recent correspondence which I have received from Property Industry Ireland (PII), which indicates that it will be some time before such an exercise is possible, and noting that the sector is very conscious of the impact of any increase in costs on its competitiveness and so there is an incentive for the sector to examine ways in which to minimise or reduce costs.

The Construction Sector Group, chaired by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, and established to ensure regular and open dialogue between Government and the construction sector in the context of the delivery of the National Development Plan, will provide a useful forum for the engagement on the wider industry impacts of COVID-19 arrangements. This Group's remit includes working with industry and government bodies to benchmark and improve productivity and environmental sustainability and to modernise public works delivery.

My Department has sought to support the current measures by encouraging planning authorities, where possible, to adopt a discretionary approach in relation to construction working hours conditions attached to planning permissions so as to assist the splitting of shifts for separating trades and activities required to achieve physical distancing on construction sites in accordance with relevant public health/ health and safety advice and protocols, while seeking to balance this with the need to ensure output and productivity by the sector.

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Within this broader frame, my Department will monitor any specific viability issues arising for the housing sector. This is an area which my Department has actively considered in recent years and measures have been brought forward such as the standardisation of documentation and innovative production methods for social housing programmes and statutory planning guidance on building heights and apartments to improve viability by lowering costs, while ensuring a quality urban environment. My Department will also continue to participate in Construction Sector Group discussions on wider industry issues, including productivity and innovation.

Home Loan Scheme

1071. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the extent to which Rebuilding Ireland home loans are available now and in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8018/20]

1072. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of persons who have made an application for Rebuilding Ireland home loans; the number granted, refused and pending, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8019/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1071 and 1072 together.

The Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan (RIHL) was launched on 1 February 2018. When the RIHL was initially being developed, it was estimated that the drawdown of loans under the scheme would be approximately €200 million over three years. The RIHL proved to be more successful than initially anticipated and following discussions with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, an increase in funding of €363.6 million for 2018-2019 was communicated to all 31 local authorities on 15 August 2019. Following further engagement with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, additional funding for new RIHL lending of up to €210 million has been secured for 2020.

It is recognised that current applicants for a Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan may be experiencing difficulties arising out of COVID-19 restrictions, including, for example, accessing financial documents; property visits and valuations; solicitors visits, etc. Therefore, local authorities are being asked to show flexibility when dealing with applicants at all stages of the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan process from application through to approval, drawdown and (where relevant) appeal and should extend the time periods as necessary to accommodate those who may be experiencing difficulties arising out of COVID-19 restrictions. For existing applicants, local authorities are advised to ensure that final loan offers are made 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.

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). My Department does not collect information on the number of applications received, pending or refused.

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.

Local Authority Housing

1073. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the directive given to local authorities in relation to the regulations brought in; the way in which these will affect housing allocations during Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8034/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Local authorities, in managing their range of functions in the context of the Roadmap for Re-opening Society and Business, adhere closely to the direction, guidance and advice from the Department of Health and the National Public Health Emergency Team for COVID-19 (NPHE). My Department and the local government sector are working together to ensure that all local government services are delivered to the greatest extent possible, where it is safe to do so.

Under section 22 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, allocation of dwellings is a housing authority function, which is undertaken in accordance with the housing authority's allocation scheme. The allocations function in local authorities has been operating throughout the period, with a particular focus on ensuring that urgent allocations are occurring, and the various aspects of the process that can occur remotely or safely in adherence with the HSE guidelines are continuing. As we move into a less restricted phase, local authorities and Approved Housing Bodies are working together to ensure that any delays that may have arisen due to the COVID-19 restrictions are addressed, in line with the Roadmap and public health advice.

Local Authority Funding

1074. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the reason a loan was denied to Clare County Council to develop a mixed housing development comprising of social and affordable housing in Meelick, County Clare. [8069/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): In accordance with the requirements in the Local Government Act 2001, Clare County Council sought sanction to borrow €6m to purchase 10 sites across the county for housing development in June 2019. When reviewing requests such as this, my Department is required to consider the borrowing capacity for the local government sector, the overall priorities of Government in terms of infrastructure, regional development and local development, as well as the alignment of local authority proposals with national and local policies and plans. Of the 10 sites that formed part of the request, sanction to borrow €3m was approved.

The National Planning Framework prioritises public investment in substantial new housing development into towns and villages, where citizens can access existing local education facilities, employment opportunities, healthcare, transport and other local services. Approved borrowing sanctions, as indicated above, have been for housing projects in such existing towns

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and villages in County Clare. My Department's Serviced Sites Fund, supporting the development of publically owned sites for affordable housing development, similarly concentrates on established city and town areas where such existing local services and infrastructure are currently available.

The Meelick site is situated within a small residential area that is isolated from such necessary local services and has severely limited public transport. The current Clare County Development Plan also indicates that the site in question is unserviced and there is no indication or commitment that the required services for development are to be provided by Irish Water to facilitate the housing development proposed by Clare County Council. Furthermore, the local authority's Core Strategy Population Target for Ballycannon North (Meelick) indicates a target increase in population of 124 Persons (45 Households) only, from 2011-2023. It is not clear whether or not the current population may have already reached this target. The scale of the proposed development, at approximately 70 housing units, is inconsistent with Departmental guidelines on Sustainable Communities, which seek to provide social housing development of a scale proportionate to the size and demand in the existing local population.

Given the very limited access to facilities, Clare County Council would be required to demonstrate that no other more suitable, better located sites are available within other large villages in the county. The Council would also have to demonstrate a high demand for the location in question by way of approved social housing applicants who have expressed a specific preference for Ballycannon North (Meelick).

It was for these reasons that this part of the loan application has not been sanctioned.

Water and Sewerage Schemes

1075. **Deputy Norma Foley** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if the necessary funding will be provided to address a major health and safety matter in respect of an out-of-order sewerage treatment plant at a location (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8094/20]

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. Kerry 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.

Traveller Accommodation

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1076. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he will work with local authority chief executives and the Minister for Health to ensure that local authorities can source, secure and supply mobile homes for self-isolation as a means of preventative health action to proactively combat Covid-19 for Travellers living in overcrowded accommodation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8172/20]

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. It is a matter for local authorities to assess the adequacy of provisions on sites (both authorised and unauthorised) and implement measures as necessary, taking into consideration advice from the HSE, fire safety guidelines, local area plans, public procurement guidelines and any other considerations relevant to their area.

In response to the COVID-19 health emergency, I and my Department have engaged with local authorities and Traveller representative groups to put a responsive plan in place to address identified and emerging health risks to the Traveller population nationwide, particularly as some members of the Traveller community, such as those living on sites with limited facilities, may be particularly vulnerable. On 18 March 2020, my Department wrote to each local authority in relation to measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and lessen the risk of infection to families residing in Traveller-specific accommodation. Local authorities were advised that my Department has funding available for essential mitigation works and that any such requests will be afforded full priority. Works identified include extra toilets or temporary sanitary blocks, running water, additional accommodation where there is overcrowding, site clean-ups and extra refuse collection, and additional units on-site or elsewhere as space permits in order to allow for self-isolation/quarantine. Many of these solutions have been, or are in the process of being, implemented on sites throughout the country and my Department has been very clear that these provisions will apply to both authorised and unauthorised sites for the duration of this crisis.

My Department is in regular contact with the local authorities and is ensuring that funding approvals, where appropriate, are granted as a matter of priority.

Mental Health Services

1077. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the details of plans for the development of the Central Mental Hospital; the involvement of the Land Development Agency in this development; the stage the development is at; the breakdown for social and affordable housing planned for the land; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8270/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): On establishment of the Land Development Agency (LDA), the Agency was tasked with the development of an initial tranche of 8 sites, including the Central Mental Hospital site in Dundrum.

On the basis of information provided by the LDA to my Department, the development at the Dundrum site is currently in pre-planning stage. Following the relocation of the Central Mental Hospital, the Dundrum site will become available to the LDA to further progress development.

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The LDA has recently appointed a design team to progress the designs and expects to lodge a planning application in mid-2021 and, subject to An Bord Pleanála approval, to begin construction in early 2022.

In September 2018, the Government approved a new public land affordability requirement. Under this requirement, a minimum of 30% of any housing developed on State lands must be reserved for affordable purposes in addition to the 10% statutory social housing requirement under Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000. The site at Dundrum will be developed in line with this requirement.

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.

Land Development Agency

1078. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he will report on the Shanganagh Castle development; if the lack of the enactment of the legislation for the Land Development Agency is holding up the progress of this development; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8271/20]

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. Article 5 of the Establishment Order empowers the LDA to provide services including the development and regeneration of land and property and securing development consents for such projects.

The site at Shanganagh is being developed by Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council in partnership with the LDA. A planning application, for the development of 597 homes on this site, was submitted to An Bord Pleanála in January 2020. I understand from the LDA that the necessary arrangements can be made for construction to commence, if the planning application is approved.

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 has been received by my Department and is being considered in the context of the further development of the proposed legislative provisions.

Housing Data

1079. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of social housing units he is expecting to be delivered from the Cherrywood SDZ; the timeline for these homes; the number of these homes that are already included in a granted planning permission; the number of these planning permissions that already have commencement notices on the site; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8272/20]

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Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Eoghan Murphy): Cherrywood Strategic Development Zone (SDZ), which, at approximately 360 hectares, is the single largest undeveloped land-bank in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, is expected to deliver 8,700 new homes. At full build-out, it is anticipated that the area will deliver approximately 870 social housing homes, in line with the 10% requirement under Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended.

Construction is ongoing in the Cherrywood Town Centre development site, with completion of the first tranche of social housing expected by the end of 2022. However, the recent COVID-19 restrictions on construction, while brief, may have some impact on timelines.

Subject to negotiation and agreement on terms, the Cherrywood SDZ has the potential to deliver 219 social housing homes on foot of planning permissions already granted for Part V obligated residential development. Construction work has already commenced on two sites which are due to deliver 141 social housing homes. Construction on a third site, which it is expected will deliver a further 24 social housing homes, is expected to commence shortly.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1080. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he will revise guidelines in relation to co-living and ensure that these kind of developments will not be allowed in view of the fact that Covid-19 has highlighted the dangers of overcrowded living conditions and the role congregated living plays in transmission of diseases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8273/20]

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 since the guidelines came into force in 2018. In comparison, there were more than 60,000 homes permitted, none of which were co-living bedspaces, from when 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

Questions - Written Answers

1081. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if tourist travel to the offshore islands may be considered under phase 4 of the Roadmap for Re-opening Society and Business (details supplied). [7087/20]

1084. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the reason non-resident tourist travel to offshore islands can only resume in phase 5 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business while tourism activities in the rest of the country with appropriate restrictions are being facilitated in phase 4; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7049/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Seán Kyne): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1081 and 1084 together.

In response to the Taoiseach's announcement on 27 March 2020, as well as to requests from island communities to limit travel to island residents only in order to keep the islands COVID free, my Department has worked closely with island representative groups and ferry operators in order to implement reduced ferry schedules serving the islands on a temporary basis. This was done to properly protect both island communities and those working on their life-line transport services during the current pandemic.

These services will be fully restored in due course in accordance with best practice, following consultation with island communities and the relevant health authorities.

While Government recognises the importance of tourism to the economy of the islands, the well being of island residents must be given priority at this time. Notwithstanding this, if a reasonable request to reopen the islands earlier than Stage 5 of the National Plan were to come from the island communities through their representative body, I would be willing to bring same to the appropriate authorities for consideration.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1082. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht her plans to assist zoos and animal parks here following the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7779/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): My Department has responsibility for the licensing and inspection of zoos under the European Communities (Licensing and Inspection of Zoos) Regulations 2003, S.I. No. 440 of 2003. Under these Regulations, zoos are obliged to operate in accordance with the standards set out in the Irish Standards of Modern Zoo Practice (ISMZP). The granting and renewal of a licence from my Department to operate, is conditional on zoos complying with these standards. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine also has a role in relation to the Animal Health and Welfare Act.

There are currently 68 licensed zoos in the country ranging from small family-run wildlife parks to large internationally renowned zoos such as Dublin Zoo, as well as a number of mobile zoos and aquaria.

Like almost all public facing businesses, zoos have been closed to the public during the current Covid-19 crisis, and the Government has a range of supports in place to assist businesses, which includes the Temporary COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme and a range of other business supports.

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In parallel with these measures, my Department is working to provide zoos with guidance and support. My Department is in contact with zoos across Ireland and with the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquaria to ensure the best possible solutions for animals and to help zoo owners continue to operate their establishments within the regulatory framework. While it has not been possible to carry out inspections due to the COVID-19 restrictions on travel and social distancing, the Department will, in so far as possible, facilitate zoos regarding licence expiry dates and meeting licence conditions. Once it is safe to do so, zoo inspections will resume. There is no licence fee charged to cover the costs associated with the inspection and licensing processes; these costs are met by the Department.

In recent days, my Department has been informed by several zoos that they plan to reopen as soon as the restrictions around COVID-19 allow and are putting in place well thought out and comprehensive plans for doing so. The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation has published the National Return to Work Safely Protocol, which guides businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures.

Wildlife Control

1083. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the consultation between her Department and the National Parks and Wildlife Services prior to the decision to rescind the derogation on wood pigeon shooting during the summer months, considering the potential impact that this move could have on tillage farming and food supplies; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7914/20]

1085. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if clarification will be provided on a matter (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7347/20]

1086. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if matters raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) will receive a response; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7351/20]

1089. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the reason for the decision to ban the shooting of pigeons during the summer months in view of the fact they are a serious cause of damage to tillage crops; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7370/20]

1093. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht her plans to address a matter in relation to wood pigeon control (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7439/20]

1094. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if a decision to lift the summer derogation on wood pigeon shooting will be reversed in view of the fact that affected stakeholders were not consulted and the derogation was introduced at a time when there is limited opportunity for scrutiny by Dáil Éireann of the decision; if the scientific evidence used in making the decision will be published; if a consultation process will be held with all stakeholders on the matter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7445/20]

1095. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if correspondence circulated from an organisation (details supplied) will receive a response. [7458/20]

Questions - Written Answers

1097. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the scientific grounds on which she refused to sign the derogation permit in 2020 which allows farmers to shoot pigeons as part of their crop protection. [7693/20]

1100. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if regulations on wood pigeon control will be deferred to allow for consultation with stakeholders (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7773/20]

1101. **Deputy Charlie McConalogue** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the reason the decision was taken to prohibit pigeon shooting (details supplied) from 31 May to 1 September 2020; if there was official consultation carried out with impacted stakeholders such as tillage farmers; and if she will review the decision in view of the way in which it may impact on tillage farmers with respect to protecting crops. [7837/20]

1103. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the reason the derogation to shoot wood pigeons during the summer months was rescinded; if the scientific evidence that led to the decision will be published; if she will reinstate the derogation pending a full public consultation on this move; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7926/20]

1104. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if her attention has been drawn to the concerns of an organisation (details supplied) and regional game councils in relation to the exclusion of wood pigeon from the derogation for June, July and August 2020; if her attention has been further drawn to the fact that the advice to farmers that fear serious damage to crops to apply for section 42 permits under the Wildlife Acts is not adequate due to delays that occur in the issue of such permits; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7952/20]

1107. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she is committed to signing the derogation classifying wood pigeon as a pest species from 31 May to 1 September 2020 thus providing tillage farmers with crop protection. [8160/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1083, 1085, 1086, 1089, 1093 to 1095, inclusive, 1097, 1100, 1101, 1103, 1104 and 1107 together.

I signed the Wild Birds State Wide Declaration last month for the period 1 May 2020 to 30 April 2021 which allows the killing and capturing of certain wild bird species where they are causing damage to crops, livestock and fauna or represent a threat to public health or safety. The Declaration allowed for the shooting of wood pigeon to prevent serious damage to arable crops except for the months of June, July and August this year. As in previous years the renewal of the Declaration was the subject of consultation with relevant stakeholders such as hunting, conservation and farming bodies as well as the National Parks and Wildlife Service of my Department.

I made the decision at the time taking account of scientific advice provided as part of the consultation. This raised concerns about the full year inclusion in the Declaration of wood pigeon on the basis that there is limited evidence to suggest that wood pigeon cause “serious damage” to crops during the summer. It was submitted that there is a lack of comprehensive studies into wood pigeon damage to crops to inform the decision to allow for year-round derogations for their control. Studies of wood pigeon food preference in Ireland from 2013 have shown that in spring, the diet of wood pigeons is dominated by fruit and seeds of trees (Ivy). In summer, the diet is variable and consists of a relatively equal proportion of cereal grains, clover and weed material.

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This 2013 study further highlighted that cereal crops were only the preferred food during the autumn months (defined as August–October in the study). Based on current cropping systems, these crops were most likely consumed post-harvest i.e., harvest spillage left on stubble fields. While the derogation is given to ‘prevent serious damage to crops’ there is limited evidence to suggest ‘serious damage’ to crops occurs during the summer period. It was also indicated that shooting of wood pigeon during summer months could have indirect adverse effects on other species such as stock dove and it was recommended that there is a need to “*undertake a contemporary review of the species interaction with crops with respect to damage*”.

Pending such a review, and on the basis of available literature and the “precautionary principle”, I considered it appropriate at the time that the wood pigeon would be removed from the Declaration for the summer months – June, July and August 2020.

At the same time, I recognised that if wood pigeons were seen to cause damage to crops during the summer, landowners could still avail of Section 42 permits under the Wildlife Acts i.e., permits, on a case by case basis, to prevent serious damage caused by individual species on specific lands.

Since the Declaration was signed last month I have considered the matter further in consultation with farming sector interests who raised concerns about the exclusion of the wood pigeon from the Declaration during the June to August period on the basis of damage to crop yield, damage to crops making them difficult to harvest and also faecal contamination.

In the circumstances and in light of potential damage highlighted by farming sector interests, I took the view that consideration of changing the status quo by removing the wood pigeon from the Declaration during this year’s summer could benefit from further information and studies.

Accordingly, I have decided that the status quo be reinstated for the wood pigeon this year i.e., that lethal means would be available to landowners during the three summer months June, July and August to prevent crop damage. I have signed a revised Declaration to this effect. Additionally, the issue of wood pigeon damage to crops during the summer months will be examined with a view to considering this issue in the 2021/22 year. A reply will issue to all correspondence received in my office on this matter.

Question No. 1084 answered with Question No. 1081.

Questions Nos. 1085 and 1086 answered with Question No. 1083.

Gorse Burning

1087. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will consider reviewing the existing penalties for those prosecuted for illegal gorse fires in view of the contention of many heritage and wildlife groups that the existing measures do not act as a sufficient deterrent. [7356/20]

1088. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the number of persons prosecuted for illegally starting gorse fires in 2018 and 2019, by county. [7358/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1087 and 1088 together.

Questions - Written Answers

My Department has taken some 8 prosecutions under the Wildlife Acts since 2010 for illegal burning of vegetation in counties Clare, Cork and Kerry. Fines have ranged from €50 to €600 with in some cases defendants also paying the prosecution legal costs and expenses. My Department also liaises with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) on cross compliance issues. It is my Department's understanding that where there is sufficient evidence to indicate that lands have been illegally burned, DAFM will withhold payments to individuals. This sends out an important message. Officers of An Garda Síochána are also authorised to take prosecutions under the Wildlife Acts.

All the penalties for breaches of the Wildlife Acts were recently reviewed and changes were incorporated in the Heritage Act 2018. The penalties for breaches of the provisions of Section 40 of the Wildlife Acts relating to the illegal cutting of hedges, clearing and burning vegetation are now set as a class A fine and carry penalties of up to €5,000. An Garda Síochána may also take criminal prosecutions for damage to property as a result of burning.

Question No. 1089 answered with Question No. 1083.

Health and Safety Regulations

1090. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if an organisation (details supplied) is proposing its members should be appointed as Covid-19 safety representatives; and her views on whether safety representatives should be from the workers in this industry and random checks should be carried out on all productions. [7377/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation has published the National Return to Work Safely Protocol, which guides businesses in making their assessments and adapting their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. The Protocol 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 that 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.

Film Industry

1091. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if her attention has been drawn to plans to develop a new film and television studio in the greater Dublin area; and if so, the support which will be provided to this development. [7379/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I understand that on 11 May last, elected members of South Dublin County Council agreed to the sale of 48 acres at Grange Castle Business Park to Lens Media Limited and that there are plans that that the site will be used for the construction of a media park which will incorporate sound stages, workshop space and office space and will facilitate film, TV and digital content production. Planned new studio facilities would be a welcome addition to the existing studio

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infrastructure in Ireland. Financial support to private sector infrastructure projects are subject to European State Aid rules.

Ireland's reputation as a location for production - both inward and indigenous - continues to grow. The Government highly values the cultural, creative and economic potential of Ireland's audiovisual industry, as reflected in the incorporation of €200m to be invested in the industry through Screen Ireland over the 10 years to 2027 and the Audiovisual Action Plan. Government support for the sector is also provided through the section 481 tax credit and training and skills development initiatives as part of that process have contributed to growing Ireland's skilled audiovisual workforce, making Ireland an attractive destination for film-making. This has given rise to an increased demand for film studio space across the country. Expansions of high quality studio space have already taken place in areas such as Troy Studios in Limerick and a number of major international projects have chosen to film on location in Ireland. While the current COVID-19 crisis has led to the temporary cessation of live action productions, it is hoped that the easing of restrictions in the coming weeks and months will allow the resumption of work already in the pipeline. In addition, in response to the lack of production activity at this time, measures introduced by Screen Ireland to support the industry are designed to aid production companies and creative talent in developing a strong slate of quality projects, so that the industry can emerge from the current situation in a position to scale up production activity in studios across the country and respond to the global rise in demand for audiovisual content. I look forward to the development of this proposed media park in Dublin and the contribution it will make to growing the audiovisual sector in Ireland.

Wildlife Control

1092. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will provide the details including briefing notes of the briefing provided to her by her Department in respect of the derogation declarations for 2020 and 2021, that is, for the period 1 May 2020 to 30 April 2021 with regard to the customary annual derogations declarations that cater for the control of certain wild bird species in the interests of public health and safety and to protect air safety. [7380/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht(Deputy Josepha Madigan): I attach the documentation submitted to me in respect of the Declarations for the period 1 May 2020 to 30 April 2021.

[Wild Birds]

Questions Nos. 1093 to 1095, inclusive, answered with Question No. 1083.

Hare Coursing

1096. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht when a licence will be issued (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7463/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): My Department has received an application from the organisation in question and a decision will be made on the application in due course.

Architectural Heritage

1098. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if her Department will purchase land to secure the curtilage of a monument (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7758/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The national monuments in State care already take in some one thousand sites at over 760 locations around the country. These command very considerable resource commitments in terms of both funding and personnel. Nevertheless, in the interests of preservation, conservation, management and presentation of the built and archaeological heritage, my Department acquires certain additional heritage properties and monuments from time to time as resources and opportunities permit. These properties may come onto the open market, may be bequeathed to the State or may be offered to it free of cost.

Lands surrounding or in proximity to national monuments or heritage properties in State care often reside in private ownership. In some cases, improved protection of, or access to, the monument or property may be achieved by the State acquiring such lands. In all cases the Department examines the potential acquisition carefully, taking into account the conservation needs of the property and Value for Money principles.

The monument referred to by the Deputy is a national monument in my guardianship as Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. Day-to-day management and maintenance of the monument is undertaken by the Office of Public Works on behalf of, and in consultation with, my Department. It is fully protected under the provisions of the National Monuments Acts, 1930-2014, and any works at or in proximity to it require Ministerial Consent under Section 14 of the 1930 Act.

There are currently no proposals before my Department in relation to the acquisition of land in the vicinity of this national monument. The Department is aware though of certain issues relating to its protection and presentation and is in touch with the local authority and Office of Public Works in relation to them. As already referred to, the purchase of an adjacent or surrounding property is among the strategies that may come to be considered for ensuring the protection of a national monument. My Department is, however, only ever in a position to make a very limited number of such acquisitions and, for business reasons, does not publicly disclose its interest in advance of any purchase negotiations.

Irish Language

1099. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht her views on the number of Béarlachas words entering the Irish language even though Irish words and expressions already exist in these cases; her plans to address this issue; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7760/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Seán Kyne): My Department is working with various institutions to develop a range of Irish language terminology and lexicography projects.

Funding continues to be provided for the successful Irish/EU terminology project LEX (GA

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IATE), which is now in its 11th year. The project, run in collaboration with Dublin City University, produces terminology in the Irish language for inclusion in the European Union's multilingual terminology database, IATE. The project has so far yielded 65,592 Irish IATE entries. Irish is in second place, just behind Polish, in terms of the number of IATE entries for the 'new' post-2004 official languages. Funding is currently in place for this project until the end of 2021.

The purpose of producing a dictionary is to mirror the vernacular and this is reflected in Foras na Gaeilge's approach to its lexicographical work, including the New English Irish Dictionary. It is natural in any language for words from other languages to enter its lexicography and, while there are those who may wish use native words at all times, the nature of sociolinguistics is complex and evolving for all languages. Notwithstanding this, Foras na Gaeilge has a Terminology Committee which aims to develop, approve and make available standard authoritative Irish language terminology to support Irish as a medium of communication in a modern society. The National Terminology Database for Irish can be accessed at <https://www.tearma.ie/>.

Questions Nos. 1100 and 1101 answered with Question No. 1083.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1102. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if supports will be put in place for buskers that suffer a loss of income until such a time as busking can recommence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7854/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The Government put income supports in place for people who have lost their income as a result of the restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of the corona virus. My colleague the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection is responsible for the COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment. This payment paid by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, is available to employees and self-employed who have lost their income as a consequence of the Coronavirus pandemic. The conditions for receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment is that a person must be of working age between 18 and up to 66 years old and have been in employment immediately before 13th March. The conditions around the payment of this payment to self-employed people is that they must have experienced a collapse of income, and be available to take up other full-time work if it was available in order to qualify. Further detail on this emergency payment and the full range of income supports available to people is available on www.gov.ie

Questions Nos. 1103 and 1104 answered with Question No. 1083.

Covid-19 Paidéim

1105. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Catherine Connolly** den an Aire Cultúir, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta cén dul chun cinn atá déanta ó thaobh na mbeart agus na dtacaíochtaí atá beartaithe chun dul i ngleic leis an ngéarchéim i gceantair Ghaeltachta de bharr Covid-19, go háirithe na coláistí samhraidh agus iad curtha ar ceal. [8046/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Seán Kyne): Dírim aird an Teachta ar na ceistanna 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

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sa Ghaeltacht an samhradh seo de bharr na paidéime 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.

Maidir leis na heagraíochtaí Gaeltachta atá bainteach le raon leathan scéimeanna agus bearta a riar thar ceann nó i gcomhar leis an Roinn faoi scáth Chlár Tacaíochtaí Pobail agus Teanga na Roinne, lena n-áirítear Scéim na gCúntóirí Teanga, mheabhróinn don Teachta go bhfuil céimeanna glactha cheana féin ag an Roinn chun a chinntiú go bhfuil cistíocht chúí curtha ar fáil do na heagraíochtaí sin araon i bhfoirm réamhíocaíochta le go mbeidh cinnteacht airgeadais acu sa tréimhse dhúshlánach seo.

Maidir lena bhfuil ar bun ag Údarás na Gaeltachta chun dul i ngleic leis na dúshláin reatha, tá an tÚdarás ag obair as lámh a chéile le Ranna Rialtais agus Gníomhaireachtaí ábhartha eile i rith an ama chun a chinntiú go mbainfidh a chliant comhlachtaí leas as an raon tacaíochtaí atá ar fáil ón Stát. Sa chomhthéacs sin, is fiú dom a threisiú go bhfuil teagmháil leanúnach ar bun idir oifigigh mo Roinne agus Údarás na Gaeltachta chun a chinntiú go bhfuil na tacaíochtaí sin ag feidhmiú mar is cuí agus chun brúphointí airgeadais a mhaolú.

Fearacht na socraithe atá luaite agam i ndáil leis na heagraíochtaí Gaeltachta a fheidhmíonn le cúnaimh reatha na Roinne, chuir an Roinn cistíocht chúí i bhfoirm réamhíocaíochta ar fáil don Údarás chun go mbeadh siad in ann coinneáil orthu ag seachadadh clár oibre atá ar leas foriomlán a chliant comhlachtaí agus geilleagar na Gaeltachta i ndeireadh báire.

Tá Údarás na Gaeltachta ag obair go dlúth le Fiontraíocht Éireann chomh maith le cinntiú go bhfuil scéimeanna tacaíochta na heagraíochta sin ar fáil do ghnólachtaí Gaeltachta go díreach tríd an Údarás. Tá deontais agus dearbháin éagsúla ar fáil chun tacú le pleanáil airgeadais, leanúnachas gnó agus trádáil ar line, mar aon leis na cistí maoinithe agus tacaíochtaí eile atá curtha ar fáil ag an Rialtas, cosúil leis an Scéim Fóirdheontais Pá Covid-19.

Arts Funding

1106. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the funding committed to festivals due to take place in County Clare in 2020, in tabular form; if the funding commitments will be honoured in view of the outlays incurred by festival committees; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8146/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): There were no applications from Co Clare to my Department's 2020 Small Local Festivals and Summer Schools Scheme.

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The Arts Council fund a number of festivals in the county of Clare under its Festival investment scheme. Further details of this scheme and others can be accessed on the Arts Council website at the following link <http://www.artscouncil.ie/Arts-in-Ireland/Festivals/>

All funding decisions can be viewed on its website at the following link <http://www.artscouncil.ie/funding-decisions/>. Funding decisions are routinely published in its annual reports and financial statements that are also available on its website. The Arts Council's annual reports and accounts are routinely laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Below is the list of festivals that the Arts Council funded in County Clare in 2019 under their programme Festival investment scheme.

- Feakle International Traditional Music Festival- €3,000
- Consairtín= Consairtín 2019, the national concertina convention. €5,000
- Ennis Book Club Festival €25,500
- Iniscealtra Arts Festival / Iniscealtra Festival of the Arts €9,500
- Killaloe Chamber Music Festival €16,000
- Oidhreacht an Chlair 7th Annual Concertina Cruinniú €3,467
- Sixmilebridge Folk Club / The Shannonside Winter Music Festival €5,000

Under the Festival investment scheme, the Arts Council provides financial support to a number of single art form festivals (e.g. theatre, dance, film) and such festivals are supported within the policy context of those art forms. We also support many multidisciplinary arts festivals, meaning those festivals that programme across different art forms, including literature, music, street arts, theatre, visual arts and different areas of arts practice.

It is important to note that under the Arts Act that the Council is statutorily independent in its funding decisions, therefore neither the Minister nor her officials have any input into this funding.

Question No. 1107 answered with Question No. 1083.

National Parks and Wildlife Service

1108. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the current staffing levels by county within the National Parks and Wildlife Service; and the service area these employees are engaged in. [8161/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): 385 employees of my Department are assigned to the area of natural heritage through the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) of the Department. Officials of my Department carry out scientific research, survey work and monitor compliance with national and European law in relation to nature conservation across the country. Assignment is not on a county basis but rather on a countrywide basis and many of these officers carry out work in more than one county. Many officials are assigned to areas that take account, not just of county boundaries but also such considerations as length of travel time, density and calibre of habitat, and species distribution.

Arts Funding

1109. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if grant funding will be made available to performers and musicians for technical equipment to facilitate livestreaming and video editing; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8186/20]

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.

In the interim, many artists are making their work available through a range of online platforms. In some instances this has been with support from my Department including under the Ireland Performs programme supported by Facebook and Culture Ireland. Under this initiative, 120 artists gave live performances online in recent weeks. All of these performances were delivered using only the artists' personal devices. In light of this, while my Department is currently examining its capital grant schemes for arts and culture organisations in the context of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, supports of the type proposed are not envisaged at present.

Arts Funding

1110. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will reconsider in the interests of the income and welfare of the recipients, reversing her decision that the dance artist residency scheme 2020 will not go ahead; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8268/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I understand that the scheme to which the Deputy refers is a funding scheme operated by the Arts Council. Under Section 24 (2) of the Arts Act 2003, the Arts Council is statutorily independent in its funding decisions and I as Minister cannot intervene in its decisions in this regard.

I understand that over the past few months, the Arts Council has taken decisions to direct its 2020 funding allocation in a way which would assist artists and arts organisations to best respond to the Covid-19 crisis. These decisions have been taken on the back of extensive and ongoing consultation with the arts sector and other stakeholders. Priority in the use of all funds is being given towards supporting the artists and arts workers.

The Council has announced a new suite of programmes which include expanded bursary, commission and professional development awards designed to sustain the ecology at this difficult time, while also offering support which enables artists to develop work and supports arts workers to enhance their skill sets. I understand that the Arts Council had already agreed to progress residences with Colleges of Education and with writer in residence programmes in a number of universities.

The Arts Council responded quickly to the impact of COVID-19 on the arts sector. At the

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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. The Council announced that it would honour all existing funding commitments and asked in particular that its regularly funded arts organisation prioritise commitments to artists. Since March 12th the Arts Council has fast-tracked the payment of up to 90% of funding to organisations and individuals. The Arts Council also 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.

The Government has provided income supports for people who have lost employment as a result of the restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of the corona virus. My colleague the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection is responsible for the COVID 19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment. This payment paid by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, is available to employees and self-employed. To receive the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, a person must be aged between 18 and 66 years, resident in the State and have been in employment up to March 2020. Self-employed people who have experienced a collapse of their income, and are available to take up other full-time work if it was available, also qualify. Further detail on this emergency payment and the full range of income supports available to people is available on www.gov.ie

