

Written Answers.

The following are questions tabled by Members for written response and the ministerial replies as received on the day from the Departments [unrevised].

Questions Nos. 1 to 5, inclusive, answered orally.

Questions Nos. 6 to 12, inclusive, resubmitted.

Questions Nos. 13 to 20, inclusive, answered orally.

IDA Ireland

21. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of IDA visits to Waterford city and county in the past two years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15822/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Robert Troy): There has been a significant increase in foreign direct investment (FDI) in County Waterford in recent years. Since 2012, employment at overseas companies in Waterford has risen by 40%, with over 120 net new jobs created in 2019. There are now over 7,000 people employed across 36 IDA client companies in the County. I am determined, together with IDA Ireland, to increase these numbers further as best we can.

An important strength for Waterford is its hard-earned reputation as a successful home to firms from the MedTech and Pharmaceuticals sectors. Companies such as GlaxoSmithKline, Sanofi and EirGen Pharma are all located there and continue to perform well. There have also been promising new investments in the County in the last 12 months – from companies such as the Emerald Contact Centre and The Agora Companies – which reflect Waterford’s wider potential across other FDI areas. This increasing diversity of profile of overseas companies there bodes well for future investment and reflects the potential of the County.

County Waterford hosted 18 site visits in 2019 and 21 site visits in 2018. There have been three site visits to Waterford as of the first quarter of this year. Information is not available on the number of visits to Waterford City as the IDA compiles such data on a county-by-county basis only.

The reduced number of site visits in 2020, as the Deputy will appreciate, is mainly attributable to the introduction of international travel restrictions related to Covid-19. Those restrictions have, amongst other things, led to the cancellation or postponement of scheduled IDA site visits and client meetings in every region of the country, including Waterford and the South-East.

Notwithstanding the difficulties presented by the pandemic, site visits do remain an important means by which the IDA can showcase regional locations – including Waterford – to

prospective investors. At the same time, we must recognise that the final decision as to where to invest always rests with the overseas company concerned. It is also the case, no matter what efforts we make to underline the undoubted benefits of regional locations, that certain firms will only consider investing in large urban areas for various commercial or operational reasons.

More broadly, it's clear the FDI will have an important role to play – both in Waterford and across Ireland – as we seek to recover from the damage caused by Covid-19. Ireland remains highly attractive to international investors and we need to continue securing new FDI projects that can create jobs and stimulate other economic activity. The IDA's positive mid-year results, which I announced last week, reflect the resilience of the FDI base here and I will be doing everything I can to support its further growth and development, including in the South-East.

Question No. 22 answered orally.

Question No. 23 withdrawn.

Questions Nos. 24 to 27, inclusive, answered orally.

Business Regulation

28. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation his plans to review regulations on business. [15820/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Robert Troy): My understanding is that the Deputy's question relates primarily to the regulations in place for the hospitality sector and licensed premises with regard to the re-opening of those businesses. These regulations are not within the remit of my Department but are, mainly, within the remit of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport with most regulation of licensed premises resting with the Department of Justice.

I understand that the Deputy is also enquiring about the giving of refunds for flights and package holidays. While legislation on these matters also falls within the remit of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, I can provide the Deputy with the following information.

In relation to airline refunds the legal position is that air passenger rights are protected by Regulation (EC) No. 261/2004, which covers the rights of passenger in instances of cancellations. 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 this EU law. That said, I understand that the main Irish airlines are currently allowing customers who are booked to travel over the summer months to move their flights with zero change fee. Where flights are cancelled by the airlines, people are entitled to a full cash refund.

Similarly, the Package Travel market is regulated at EU level – the Package Travel Directive provides important consumer protections including the right to cancel a package holiday and receive a refund. The COVID-19 crisis has severely disrupted the travel plans of many, with many opting to follow Government advice not to undertake non-essential travel. As a result, Irish licensed tour operators and travel agents have seen an unprecedented demand for refund of package holidays - the Directive obligates them to refund even if flights go ahead.

Clearly the existing consumer protections and legal obligations on airlines and the broader travel sector did not envisage the current circumstances of mass cancellations and stringent travel restrictions across the globe. That has, not surprisingly, put the entire system under immense pressure and it is causing real difficulties for people and businesses.

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The Minister for Transport has approved regulations to provide a State-guarantee for credit notes issued by Irish-licensed travel agents and tour operators, known as Refund Credit Notes. Where a customer agrees to accept a Refund Credit Note instead of cash, the cash value of the refund credit note is guaranteed, until such time as the customer decides to cash it or use it against a rebooked holiday. This will help support viable, Irish businesses through these unprecedented times.

My colleague Eamonn Ryan, Minister for Climate Action, Communications Networks and Transport, is also aware that the options put forward by airlines may not be fair or workable for customers in all instances, and he will be raising this with the industry at the first available opportunity.

Legislative Measures

29. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation his priority legislation in the area of workers' rights and employment legislation; if the Employment Permits Act will be amended for migrant workers to make it possible to access the Workplace Relations Commission and Labour Court; if legislation regarding SEOs and collective agreements will be strengthened; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15814/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Damien English): While employments rights policy is currently the responsibility of my colleague Minister Heather Humphreys T.D. in the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, it will soon be transferring to my Department. I understand that there is no pending priority legislation in the area of employment rights at this time.

I am concerned that there appears to be a mistaken belief out there that migrant workers – and by this term I mean workers who are from outside the European Economic Area who rely on employment permits to access the Irish Labour market – are somehow outside the protections that the State guarantees for all workers. Irish employment law does not discriminate. All workers in Ireland are entitled to refer employment rights complaints to the Workplace Relations Commission and the Labour Court. Migrant workers enjoy the same protections under the Payment of Wages Act, Organisation of Working Time Act, Employment Equality Acts, and so on, as any Irish worker.

The Workplace Relations Commission provides information booklets on employment rights in 15 languages, including Irish. These are available on the WRC's website.

I have clarified my position concerning the Sectoral Employment Orders already today. We will appeal the High Court decision. I am committed to the sectoral employment orders and will be taking any action necessary to ensure stability in the sectors concerned.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

30. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the consideration his Department is giving to additional measures that may be needed to support the hospitality, retail, entertainment, arts and leisure sectors. [15801/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As the Deputy will know, many of the sectors referred to in the question relate to policy responsibilities of other Ministers but I am happy to outline my position on how best to assist

enterprises in the current circumstances and into the future.

Firstly, I would remind the Deputy that much has already been done. Some of the supports already available include:

- the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme - under which the Government has invested almost €2 billion in supporting the maintenance of employment across the enterprise sector;

- the €250 million Restart Fund to help small businesses to reopen their doors and get back on their feet;

- a €2 billion Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund within the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund which is making capital available to medium and large enterprises;

- 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;

- relief on rates for three months for businesses that were closed;

- a €450m Working Capital scheme from the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI); and

- an additional €200m Future Growth Loan Scheme (SBCI) to be released in tranches, providing longer-term loans to COVID-19 impacted businesses.

The full list of the business supports is available on my Department’s website.

My Department has developed a range of proposals which I have brought to the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment for consideration. These proposals, along with others from Ministerial colleagues, will be developed further for the Government’s consideration of an ambitious stimulus package which will be announced soon.

There are some welcome signs of improvement in business activity and the economy. However, sectors that employ a lot of people, such as tourism and hospitality, arts and entertainment and other services that rely on social interaction, remain in serious difficulty and their recovery prospects are highly uncertain. While we can’t keep every firm and job alive, our emphasis is to protect jobs insofar as we can.

It would be inappropriate to set out now the details of the proposals, but I can assure the Deputy that the Government will not be found wanting. Not only must we overcome the current challenges but we must also look ahead.

The July stimulus package to be announced shortly, will be radical, of scale and far-reaching. In considering the analyses, I see five areas in which we should focus on in helping our enterprises in the future.

1. Income supports for workers
2. Direct grants for businesses
3. Cheaper finance
4. New opportunities for future jobs
5. Support for the hardest hit sectors

The July Stimulus needs to help firms meet the fixed, non-wage costs incurred during lock-

down and in re-opening.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

31. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when the new €2 billion credit guarantee scheme will be operational; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15806/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The new €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme announced by Government forms a major component of the Government's strategy to aid SMEs in these difficult times. It will provide critical support to ensure businesses are facilitated in having access to credit facilities to assist a return to a more regular trading environment.

It is a further development of the existing Credit Guarantee Scheme and will initially be available through the current finance providers Allied Irish Banks, Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank Ireland.

The Scheme will provide an 80% State guarantee on lending until the end of this year, for terms between 3 months and 6 years and will offer a range of lending products between €10,000 and €1 million including working capital and term loan facilities.

The key feature of the Scheme is that it will ensure the availability of liquidity to businesses by leveraging the strong relationship between banks and their customers all over the country.

There are a number of steps which need to be completed in relation to the Scheme, however, it is likely that the new Credit Guarantee Scheme will be available in September/October. It will commence second stage debate in the Dail next week.

The implementation of this Scheme requires amendments to the Credit Guarantee Act 2012 and following approval to publish the Credit Guarantee (Amendment) Bill 2020, the legislation will be considered by the Oireachtas in the coming week.

In addition to the legislative requirements, this ambitious COVID-19 CGS requires important engagement with the European Commission and the participating finance providers.

The new Scheme will take advantage of the relaxation of State Aid rules under the European Commission's Temporary Framework which has provided the opportunity to widen the base of the current Credit Guarantee Scheme to now include primary producers. My officials are currently engaged with the European Commission in seeking approval and ensuring the Scheme's adherence to the rules set out in its Temporary Framework.

Officials from my Department and from the Department of Finance and Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine along with the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland are engaging with finance providers in relation to the specific terms and conditions of the Scheme.

This engagement provides the opportunity to develop the Scheme with provisions that help its effective and efficient roll-out. As the State is providing a significant support to banks to provide credit facilities to companies, it is expected that the banks will apply interest rates below current market rates. It should also be noted that as required by the Temporary Framework, a premium will be charged in recognition of the State backed guarantee.

I expect the participating finance providers to implement this Scheme in an efficient and effective manner to ensure that this badly needed finance is quickly made available to businesses.

Enterprise Support Services

32. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the measures he is taking to support small and medium enterprises in the Border region; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15793/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): SMEs play a pivotal role in our economy and their role will be essential in getting people back to work and helping our economy to grow again. Therefore, helping our SMEs is central to my role as Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

As you will be aware the Local Enterprise Offices operate in every county in Ireland including border counties and provide advice, information and support to businesses in starting up or growing their business.

The full range of Local Enterprise Office advisory supports continue to be available throughout the regions 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.

Furthermore, the Border Enterprise Development Fund (BEDF) which was launched in January, and is administered by Enterprise Ireland on behalf of my Department provides support for collaborative, enterprise capability building projects, to advance entrepreneurship, productivity and innovation in the Border Region. The aim of the fund is to improve the international competitiveness of enterprise in the Border Region in the context of Brexit and other market challenges, which now also include COVID-19. The Fund is part of a €28 million economic stimulus package announced earlier this year for the six border counties of Louth, Monaghan, Cavan, Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal.

On 22 June last, the then Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Heather Humphreys TD, named the 11 successful border county projects from the North East and North West of the country approved to share in the €17m Border Enterprise Development Fund 2020, an initiative administered for my Department by Enterprise Ireland.

Nineteen applications were received from project groups in Counties Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan and Louth with 11 projects selected for funding following a rigorous evaluation process. Four of the finalist projects will be based in Louth, two in Monaghan, two in Donegal, one in Cavan, one in Sligo and one in Leitrim.

The successful projects are closely aligned with the Strategic Objectives for enterprise development set out in the Regional Enterprise Plans for the North-East and the North West, particularly in relation to strengthening SME resilience and innovation, growing entrepreneurship, and creating quality jobs across the Border region.

Guided by the Regional Enterprise Plans, the border region is well positioned to continue to see the benefits and results of collaborative and innovative initiatives that can make a significant impact on enterprise development in the region. IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland are continuing their important work in assisting businesses in the region to sustain and grow employment and also in winning new investments for the border counties.

In addition and as stated in the Programme for Government, we will bring forward a July Stimulus to support our economy and help restore employment. Our focus is to support the viability of the business and enterprise sector and to get people back to work as quickly as possible in all sectors and in all regions.

While I have emphasised the importance of preserving existing firms and jobs, the July Stimulus package should also have an eye to exploiting emerging opportunities and attract high value projects with significant economic benefits. Importantly, the July Initiative must position our economy and firms in all our regions to meet future challenges. In the near-term, this includes helping companies further in overcoming the challenges of Brexit but we also need to include measures that build enterprise resilience. This will have particular importance for the firms in our border regions.

All supports are currently being reviewed and assistance in the form of grants, including in preparation for Brexit will be considered.

I look forward to announcing the details of the July Stimulus package shortly.

Legislative Measures

33. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if the amending of employment legislation and the Companies Act 2014 will be made a priority in view of a dispute at a company (details supplied) and the past failure to legislate and in further view of the Duffy Cahill report; if the passage of the Protection of Employees (Collective Redundancies) Bill 2017 will be supported, which passed Second Stage in the Thirty-second Dáil; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15813/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Debenhams is a court-supervised liquidation, subject to oversight of the High Court and accordingly is sub judice. Under the Companies Act 2014, I have no power to intervene in a court-supervised liquidation.

The Duffy-Cahill report found in overall terms that “the provisions of the Companies Act 2014 that are already available do not appear to be in need of amendment, but more in need of use.” A range of factors will be involved for liquidators or creditors in deciding whether to pursue litigation based on the provisions of the Companies Act 2014. Such statutory provisions and associated civil and criminal penalties also provide an important deterrent effect in terms of companies complying with their obligations under the Companies Act 2014.

In 2017, in parallel with the Duffy-Cahill report, the Company Law Review Group undertook a root and branch review of the Companies Act to address concerns raised in respect of the protection of employees and unsecured creditors. The report which emanated from this review by the Company Law Review Group, also generally found that the current provisions of the Companies Act 2014 provide a comprehensive framework which strikes a balance between the interests of members of a company and other stakeholders, including employees.

The Protection of Employment Act 1977 imposes a number of obligations on employers who are proposing collective redundancies, including official notification to the relevant Minister and a 30 day consultation period to allow employee representatives adequate opportunity to consider the employer’s proposals and to make constructive proposals in response. While responsibility for this legislation currently rests with my colleague the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, it will shortly transfer to my Department under a wider transfer of functions Order.

The Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) is an office under the aegis of my Department which is available to any interested parties who may require it. As part of its functions the WRC provides information relating to employment entitlements and obligations, equality and industrial relations matters.

It is my understanding that the Protection of Employees (Collective Redundancies) Bill 2017 lapsed with the dissolution of the Dáil and Seanad on the 14th of January 2020. Pursuant to the Standing Orders of both Houses of the Oireachtas it will be for the Oireachtas to restore the Bill to the Order Paper.

The Government has committed in the Programme for Government to review whether the current legal provisions surrounding collective redundancies and the liquidation of companies effectively protect the rights of workers, and I intend to ensure that this is progressed in a timely manner.

Competition and Consumer Protection Commission

34. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if he will list the requests made under section 10(4) of the Competition and Consumer Protection Act 2014 to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission; his plans to make a further request; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15682/20]

37. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the detail of the requests made under section 10(4) of the Competition and Consumer Protection Act 2014 to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission; his plans to make a further request; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15635/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 34 and 37 together.

Ensuring fair competition while protecting consumer welfare is vital for the continued growth of the economy. When I become aware of serious issues of concern, I may invoke the powers under Section 10(4) of the Competition and Consumer Protection Act 2014 to request that the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC) conducts relevant studies or analysis relating to consumer protection and welfare, reviews any practice or method on competition affecting the supply and distribution of goods or the provision of services, or any other matter relating to competition.

Since 2014, three requests have been made under Section 10(4) of the Competition and Consumer Protection Act 2014 to the CCPC. The requests concern:

1. Options for Ireland's Mortgage Market

In June 2017, the CCPC published 'Options for Ireland's mortgage market', which reviewed how best to lower the cost of secured mortgage lending and improve competition and consumer protection in the market. The CCPC set out thirteen options for Government to address barriers to entry to the Irish market. The options were split into short, medium, and long term measures and focused on restoring trust in the banking sector, consumer switching and business friendly initiatives to attract entry into the market. The report was submitted to the Minister of Finance who had requested the study. The consideration and implementation of the options with the relevant Departments and Agencies is a matter for the Department of Finance.

2. The Operations of Ireland's Waste Collection Market

In September 2018, the CCPC published 'The Operation of the Household Waste Collection Market' study, which was the first in-depth analysis of this market from a competition and consumer protection perspective. The CCPC reviewed the current structure and the evolution of the waste collection market, the economic theory behind utility markets and compared Ireland's

market to those of other European countries. The CCPC identified a range of issues on the operation of the market and the CCPC's findings indicated that the market was moving towards a service provision model of unregulated monopoly operators, where the State in most cases did not have any means of incentivising or controlling the market. The report was submitted to the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, who had requested the study. It is my understanding that the recommendations are under consideration as part of the development of a new Waste Action Plan for Ireland.

3. The Operation of the Public Liability Insurance Market

On 15 August 2019, the former Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation requested that the CCPC examine how the public liability insurance market operates, how competition works in that market and whether any practice or method of competition affects the pricing levels of public liability insurance within that market. To fulfil the request, the CCPC has reported that it is currently completing an exercise that includes the following actions:

- A review of current issues and recent studies in the sector, including the reports of the Cost of Insurance Working Group and the Personal Injuries Commission.

- An overview of how the market operates and how public liability insurance is procured, including the extent to which insurance is intermediated by brokers or purchased directly from insurers.

- An analysis of the market structure and levels of competition.

- Determinants of costs, premia and profitability in the market.

- An assessment of barriers to entry and exit.

- A review of similar markets and studies internationally.

To develop the study, the CCPC is undertaking a wide range of activities where the majority are nearing completion:

Holding meetings with representative groups, public bodies, industry representatives and customers.

Conducting customer focussed market research among a representative sample of businesses, community groups and sports organisations.

Issuing a public consultation paper to obtain the views of key stakeholders.

Analysing data that is available on the market.

Undertaking desk-based research.

The CCPC is currently reviewing the type and range of information obtained to date to ensure that any potential issues that could impact on the level of competition in this market are identified. This will also help inform any potential recommendations which will be developed in the final stage of the study. The CCPC is working to conclude the study as efficiently as possible as a key priority for the organisation.

Ministerial Priorities

35. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise

and Innovation the extent to which he expects to combine enterprise and innovation in the context of maximising economic recovery from the Covid-19 crisis; the degree to which he has identified precise job numbers to be realised in this context on an annual basis over the next five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15688/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The new Programme for Government clearly sets out that this will be a Government of enterprise, creating new jobs, preparing for the jobs of the future, driving our economic recovery and improving the quality of life for all our people.

Since I took up the role of Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, my focus has been on preparing the July Stimulus Package which will be radical, of scale and far-reaching. Not only must we overcome the current challenges, but we must also look ahead and set our economy on the right course for the future.

Already there are some welcome signs of improvement in business activity and the economy. However, sectors that employ a lot of people, such as tourism and hospitality, arts and entertainment and other services that rely on social interaction, continue to be in serious difficulty and their recovery prospects are highly uncertain. The emphasis of Government is to preserve as many jobs as possible within those sectors, and to enable new jobs to be created elsewhere within the economy.

The Programme for Government also indicates that enabling our SMEs to return to capacity where possible and more broadly to strengthen SME resilience, productivity and innovation will be an important focus for the National Economic Plan. Increasing investment in RD&I and promoting strong links between enterprise and the research community will assist in ensuring that Ireland keeps its relative advantage in technological adoption, increases the development of the green economy and assist in maximising our economic recovery.

The Future Jobs Ireland framework will also be updated in light of the crisis and new priorities. The importance of RD&I, and how we can drive developments in this area, was woven through the pillars of Future Jobs Ireland 2019, in particular Pillars 1 (Embracing Innovation and Technological Change), 2 (Improving SME Productivity), and 3 (Enhancing Skills and Developing and Attracting Talent) and must continue to be an integral part of the Future Jobs Ireland agenda.

Regional Enterprise Development Fund

36. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if Enterprise Ireland and his Department have conducted a review of the regional enterprise development fund to identify gaps in funding provision in support of regional enterprise development; if so, the findings of the review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15762/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department's Regional Enterprise Development Fund (REDF) was introduced to support the development and implementation of collaborative and innovative projects that can sustain and add to employment at county, regional and national level. The REDF, which is administered by Enterprise Ireland, has been an effective instrument of policy particularly as a complement to my Department's Regional Enterprise Plans where it has served as an enabler for projects emerging from that regional collaborative process. There have been three calls under the Fund to date and just over €100 million in funding has been approved across 68 projects,

with projects approved in every region.

Following the conclusion of the first two Calls under the REDF, in March 2019, my officials and officials from Enterprise Ireland reviewed the format and process of the Scheme and this informed some technical changes to the subsequent Third Call in June 2019; for example a reduction of the number of streams from four to three, as well as associated adjustments to the funding ranges.

Enterprise Ireland has not carried out an ex-post review of the Scheme as yet, owing to the fact that projects funded are currently in the various stages of implementation. However, a National Oversight Group, comprising of officials from my Department and Enterprise Ireland has been established to review overall progress on each project against timelines and projected drawdown of funds. The National Oversight Group meets on a quarterly basis and the next meeting is scheduled for 23 July 2020.

Enterprise Ireland has advised me that it plans a full review of the Regional Enterprise Development Fund and the Border Enterprise Development Fund to commence later this year to determine the impact of the initiatives and the learnings for any future schemes.

Enterprise Ireland continues to monitor the effective implementation of projects approved under the three REDF calls as part of its ongoing Regional Development Strategy.

Question No. 37 answered with Question No. 34.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

38. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the funding that has been made available for each of the schemes offered to assist businesses due to Covid-19; the number of applications to each scheme; the number of unsuccessful and successful applications, respectively; the amount approved and sanctioned for successful applicants under each of the schemes; the amount actually released to successful applicants under each of the schemes to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15753/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Government has put in place a range of measures to assist firms to deal with the impacts of COVID 19 on their businesses, to reopen and to sustain employment. We are developing the July stimulus which will be ambitious and radical in deepening and widening the impact of the range of measures we have in place.

Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme

The Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme is offered 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 through participating finance providers. It makes available a fund of up to €200 million in lending 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 impacts of the pandemic. Work is under way on a significant expansion to the scheme which will be brought to the market in the coming weeks.

The scheme is open to eligible SMEs and small mid-caps (businesses of up to 499 employees) negatively impacted by Covid-19. Loans under the scheme range from €25,000 to €1.5m and are for periods of up to three years. The maximum interest rate under the scheme is 4% and

loans of up to €500,000 are available unsecured.

MFI Loan

The Covid-19 Loan, available from Microfinance Ireland (MFI), was introduced as a support to microenterprises to help them access funding arising from the Covid-19 crisis. These loans are available for eligible microenterprises responding to Covid-19-related difficulties, the negative impact of which must be a minimum of 15% of actual or projected income or profit. Loans up to €50,000 are available with terms that include a six months interest free and repayment free moratorium, with the loan to then be repaid over the remaining 30 months of the 36-month loan period. Interest rates of between 4.5% and 5.5% are available. Funding of €15.65 million has been made available to MFI since March.

Credit Guarantee Scheme

The Credit Guarantee Scheme is available to Covid-19 impacted businesses, it supports loans up to €1 million for periods of up to 7 years. The Scheme offers a partial Government guarantee (currently 80%) to banks against losses on qualifying loans to eligible SMEs. The scheme is designed to support a range of debt products appropriate to the borrowing needs of SMEs. Term loans and other products such as stocking facilities, performance bonds will be covered by the Scheme. There is no direct funding provided to the Scheme. The Scheme give rise to a contingent liability with payments made on individual claims under the Scheme.

Business Continuity Support (IDA Ireland): An initial application for €2,500 support for training or advisory services related to the continued operation or re-start of businesses during the current pandemic. Further support can be applied for up to a maximum of €29,700. This support is open to small, medium or large client companies of IDA Ireland.

The Restart Grant was launched on 22 May 2020 and is a critically important tool to support small businesses to reopen their doors and get back on their feet with supports of a minimum of €2,000 up to €10,000 available. The scheme was devised in recognition of the fact that micro and small businesses were and are particularly vulnerable to the economic effects of Covid-19.

Using funding allocated by Enterprise Ireland for the Scheme, the Local Authorities are the granting authority in each of their respective areas in accordance with the criteria for the Scheme and the Local Authorities make grant payments to the bank account of qualifying businesses, in accordance with the scheme. The grants are available through the Local Authorities using a simple online application form.

The Restart Grant is just one part of a wider assistance package for business and for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, the pandemic unemployment payment for the self-employed, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs. Within the funding available so far, the priority has been to assist those who have suffered most, including closure of the business, but whom will still have incurred ongoing costs.

Enterprise Ireland is working with client companies to support the stabilisation of their business so that they can undertake a developmental programme focused on recovery and growth. To support companies the agency has:

- Developed and launched a suite of new funding supports utilising the additional flexibility permitted under Ireland's Sustaining Enterprise Scheme supporting undertakings affected by the economic repercussions of the COVID-19 outbreak under the Temporary Framework for State Aid Measure to Support the Economy in the Current COVID-19 Outbreak.

- Set up a Business Response Hub to provide information to companies on what supports are available to assist with their specific needs. To date the agency has supported 4,800 companies through the Hub.

As a first step, companies need to stabilise their business, with the two key elements of this being business planning and accessing liquidity. To assist companies with this, the following COVID-19 supports have been introduced:

Lean Business Continuity Support: This €2.5k grant supports companies to access training or advisory services related to crisis management, sustaining operations, moving to e-business/online and planning for resilience post crisis.

Reflecting the practical and immediate nature of this support, company interest and demand has been strong.

COVID-19 Business Financial Planning Grant: This grant of up to €5k provides 100 per cent funding for companies to access a financial consultant to prepare a financial plan to assist companies:

- understand their immediate financial position, secure the finance required to survive and provide a framework to sustain the business; and

- ensure they have a framework to identify and manage costs and gaps in funding.

This is a critical support for a company to strengthen their position to identify funding needs and access required funding to implement their business plan. Since its launch in April, 669 applications for funding have been received by the agency. Currently 608 have been approved.

Once a company has a financial and business continuity plan, Enterprise Ireland can provide funding for companies who have been impacted by COVID- 19, either through a reduction in turnover/profit or a significant increase in costs. The purpose of this funding is to enable the company to firstly, stabilise, and then, to implement a business sustainment plan, leading to a return to viability and contributing to the recovery of the Irish economy. The agency's liquidity and medium-term financial supports are being delivered under the **Sustaining Enterprise Fund**. Support of up to €800,000 can be provided to companies, with different levels of support and funding instruments available, which are targeted at companies at different stages of development and growth (e.g. established companies, start-ups and small enterprises).

Supporting Retailers impacted by COVID-19: Enterprise Ireland launched a COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme in April to assist retailers to enhance their online capability and to develop a more competitive online offer. On 2nd July 2020 I announced that 183 retailers had been approved for €6.5m in funding as part of the scheme. The value of the scheme, which received 373 applications, was increased from €2m to €6.5m due to the high level of demand amongst retailers and the high quality of the proposals received.

The Business Continuity Voucher scheme was launched on 26th March and was closed for new applications on 15th May. It was designed for businesses across every sector that employ up to 50 people. The voucher, worth up to €2,500 in third party consultancy costs, was used by companies and sole traders to develop short-term and long-term strategies to respond to the initial Covid-19 pandemic and to plan for the eventual recovery and reopening of the economy.

The Trading Online Voucher Scheme was originally launched nationally by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment in mid-2014. The Scheme offers financial assistance in the form of a Voucher of up to €2,500 in order to procure expert consultancy advice on trading on-line including website management and is delivered along with

training and advice to help business trade online.

E-Merge (InterTradeIreland)

The E-Merge programme provides consultancy support to assist companies develop online sales and eCommerce solutions to the value of £2,500/€2800. The scheme is open to cross-border enterprises, registered on the island of Ireland, and is involved in manufacturing or tradable services (other conditions also apply). Consultancy support can assist enterprises in areas such as search engine optimisation (SEO), and website management.

Emergency Business Solutions (InterTradeIreland)

This scheme, co-funded by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and the Department for the Economy (NI) allows eligible companies to avail of professional advice, to the value of £2,000/€2,250 including VAT (100% funded), to address business challenges arising from the pandemic. Eligible companies are cross-border in nature and involved in manufacturing and tradable services.

Table 1. Detail of Take-up of Schemes as of 3rd July 2020

Scheme	No. of Applications	No. of Unsuccessful	No. of Successful	Amount approved and sanctioned for successful applicants	Amount actually released to successful applicants under each of the schemes to date
				· Approved· Sanctioned	
Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme	3,288	15	2,966	* 632 loans progressed to sanction at bank level, to a total value of €76.56m	Drawdown figure not yet available
MFI Covid-19 loan	1015	164 declined 115 ineligible or withdrawn	624	€16,926,475	€12,772,964
Credit Guarantee Scheme	N/a	5 since March 2020	N/a	€1,606,000	€1,606,000
IDA Ireland Business Continuity Support	46	0	46	Approved – €115,000 Sanctioned – €115,000	Zero
Restart Grant	40,506	13,336	26870	· Approved- €94,795,163· Sanctioned- €15,044,550	€94,795,163
Business Financial Planning	669	N/a	608	€2,990,153	€94,259
Lean Business Continuity Voucher	298	N/a	245	€612,500	€52,035
Sustaining Enterprise Fund	43	N/a	15	€6,450,000	€300,000
Sustaining Enterprise Fund – HPSU	26	N/a	22	€1,100,000	€200,000

Scheme	No. of Applications	No. of Unsuccessful	No. of Successful	Amount approved and sanctioned for successful applicants	Amount actually released to successful applicants under each of the schemes to date
				· Approved · Sanctioned	
Sustaining Enterprise Fund – Small Enterprise	13	N/a	6	€275,000	€100,000
Covid-19 Online Retail Scheme	373	N/a	183	€6.5 million	€0
The Businesses Continuity Voucher	14,856	2,512**	11,261	· Approved · - €23.84m · Sanctioned - · €27m	2,680,700***
Trading On-line Voucher Scheme	7,130	453	4,303	Approved - €9.22m Sanctioned - €19.8m	1,401,815

*with the Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme there are two different application processes (the first with SBCI and the second with a participating bank). As such, there is an “approved” number (of firms who have received eligibility approval) and a second “sanctioned” number (of firms who have been approved lending by the bank after that first application).

**Applications Processed of 13,773 less applications approved of 11,261

***This is the amount paid to voucher recipients and consultants paid on their behalf. There are two methods of client engagement in respect of the Business Continuity Voucher (BCV).

Job Retention

39. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the steps he is taking to secure employment in Ballinasloe, County Galway, following a review of operations announced by a company (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15676/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I understand that staff at Aptar have been informed that the company is reviewing its operation at Ballinasloe. While no decision has yet been taken, I am informed that this review could lead to redundancies later this year. IDA Ireland are in close contact with the firm and are working to try avert, if possible, any potential job losses.

The uncertainty the situation has created is obviously an unwelcome development for the staff at the company and the region. My primary concern is for the workers and families who could be directly affected, many of whom have worked with the company for many years. In the regrettable event that redundancies do result, the Government will make every State support available to those impacted in order to help them transition and find new employment opportunities.

I am asking the West Regional Enterprise Committee, on which the key agencies and local authorities are represented, to consider all scenarios in relation to this company.

The situation at the company is particularly unfortunate given the wider economic difficulties that have been presented by COVID-19. My focus, since I became Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, has been on supporting businesses and protecting jobs. We have also been working hard on the forthcoming Jobs Stimulus Package, which will include far-reaching measures to set us on the right course for the next five years and beyond. Our aim is to create new employment opportunities all over the country, including in County Galway.

My Department and its Agencies have also been working hard, over a sustained period, to support job creation in the regions. This has included setting ambitious targets to ensure that employment and investment are distributed as evenly as possible across the country. Last year, there were over 21,000 people employed in IDA-supported firms in Galway. This is almost double the number employed in 2010 (11,235). While the period ahead may prove more challenging, an important objective will remain securing new foreign direct investment for the County.

Wider enterprise efforts are also underway to generate new growth in Galway and the surrounding area. For example, regional stakeholders – including Enterprise Ireland, the LEOs and the Higher and Further Education Institutes – are working together on implementation of the Regional Enterprise Plan for the West. This is aimed at strengthening the environment for job creation in the region and Ballinasloe will also benefit from this.

Another important initiative in this context is the Regional Enterprise Development Fund, through which over €16.7m in funding for the West – over three competitive calls – has been approved for collaborative regional enterprise projects. The region has had particular recent success, with five Galway-based projects being awarded a total of €9.6m. These projects are currently being developed and their completion will enhance the attractiveness of the area for further investment and job creation.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

40. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the amount of funding provided to businesses under the business restart grant; the number of companies that have received funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15804/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Restart Grant was launched on 22 May 2020 and is a critically important tool to support small businesses to reopen their doors and get back on their feet. Grant payments available range from a minimum of €2,000 up to €10,000 available. The scheme was devised in recognition of the fact that micro and small businesses were and are particularly vulnerable to the economic effects of Covid-19.

Using funding allocated by my Department through Enterprise Ireland for the Scheme, the Local Authorities are the granting authority in each of their respective areas in accordance with the criteria for the Scheme and the Local Authorities make grant payments to the bank account of qualifying businesses, in accordance with the scheme.

The Restart Grant is just one part of a wider assistance package for business and for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, the pandemic unemployment payment for the self-employed, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs. Within the funding available so far, the priority has been to assist those who have suffered most, including closure of the business, but whom will still have incurred ongoing costs.

14 July 2020

As of 10 July 2020, 40,506 businesses have applied for €141.7 million in grants. A total sum of €94,795,163 in grants has been disbursed to businesses by local authorities to date, in respect of 23,326 applications.

A further sum of €15,044,550 is due to be paid in respect of applications which have recently been approved.

The Restart grant scheme has been broadly welcomed by those businesses which have benefited. However, the July stimulus package, among other things, needs to help all firms meet the fixed, non-wage costs incurred during lockdown and in re-opening. Our current Restart Grant is a significant help and I am keen to widen and deepen its impact. That is why a review has commenced to identify the effectiveness of the Scheme and also, in line with an undertaking given in the Programme for Government, to carry out a general review of the Restart Grant which will be concluded shortly.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

41. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the supports his Department will provide to outdoor active tourism businesses that are facing closure due to the restrictions of Covid-19 and high insurance costs with no access to credit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15764/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department and its agencies have worked with businesses across all sectors since the arrival of Covid 19 to help businesses overcome the challenge presented by the pandemic. The Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms, 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 my Departments website on <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

My Department has put in place a number of loan schemes to provide access to funding to meet working capital and investment needs of microenterprises and SMEs to meet the strong demand for cash availability.

The full range of Local Enterprise Office 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.

As stated in the Programme for Government, we will bring forward a July Stimulus to support our economy and help restore employment. Our focus is to support the viability of the business and enterprise sector and to get people back to work as quickly as possible in all sectors including the tourism sector. Helping our SMEs is central to this, given their pivotal role in the economy and employment. The July Stimulus will extend, enhance and add to the existing measures totalling €12bn in supports for Covid-19 impacted businesses already announced.

Currently, any business (Sole Trader, Partnership or Limited Company) with less than 10 full time employees and annual turnover of up to €2m may apply to Microfinance Ireland for

funding from €5,000 – €50,000 where the business is not in a position to avail of finance from Banks and other commercial lending providers. The loan incurs 0% interest for the first six months and Zero repayments. Thereafter a reduced interest rate of 4.5% APR applies to loans applied for through the Local Enterprise Office.

The Restart Grant, for example, is just one part of a wider assistance package for business and for firms of all sizes. Businesses in this particular segment of the tourism sector are eligible to apply for the Restart grant if they operate from rateable premises; for example, an office location and rented storage space for equipment. Under the current rules of the scheme, if an entrepreneur operates such a service from their home, they are not eligible for the grant.

Regarding any further targeted measures specifically aimed at the tourism and hospitality sectors, in March 2020 a dedicated Tourism Recovery Taskforce was established made up of leaders from various sectors of the industry, who will work together to deal with the many challenges ahead. It has been specifically tasked with identifying measures required to enable Irish tourism to recover from the devastating effects of COVID19.

Local enterprise offices also offer a Trading Online Voucher Scheme, this scheme is funded by the Department of Communications Climate Action and Environment and delivered nationwide in partnership with the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Enterprise Ireland and the 31 Local Enterprise Offices. There has been a tremendous demand for the scheme from enterprises across the country since its expansion.

On the 8th of June the Government announced additional funding of €14.2m to continue the Scheme bringing the total funding allocation in 2020 to €19.8m. This additional funding will allow LEOs to approve additional vouchers to successful applicants. The Scheme offers skills training, mentoring and financial support of up to €2,500 to help small and micro-businesses to develop their ecommerce capability. New flexibilities to the Scheme were introduced in April including reducing the requirement for co-funding from 50% to 10% and allowing businesses to apply for a second voucher of up to €2,500 where they have successfully utilised their first one. As you may be aware the Schemes outlined above offer specific, experienced mentoring for their clients.

All LEOs also offer a number of ‘soft’ supports in the form of training or mentoring such as:

The Mentor Programme which 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.

The LEO Management Development programmes which provide the owner-manager with the management, leadership, business skills and knowledge to achieve sustainability and growth in their business.

LEAN for Micro which is a targeted programme for Local Enterprise Office clients to help small businesses boost competitiveness, increase performance and profitability as well as building resilience within their companies.

Further to this, if a potential business is not eligible for direct grant aid, an entrepreneur with a viable business proposal can also use their LEO to make an application to MicroFinance Ireland, which offers support in the form of loans of up to €25,000 to start-ups with viable business propositions, that do not meet the conventional risk criteria applied by the banks. Successful applicants can avail of a more favourable interest rate from MFI of 6.8% if they make their application through the LEOs.

My former colleague, the then Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Re-

gina Doherty announced on 25 June that the Department's Enterprise Support Grant will be made available to assist self-employed recipients who are exiting the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) scheme with a once-off grant of up to €1,000 to re-start their business. The grant will be payable to self-employed micro enterprises which employ fewer than 10 people, have an annual turnover of less than €1 million and are not eligible for support from the COVID19 Business Restart Grant or other similar business reopening grants.

All COVID19 business Schemes are under constant review in terms of the evolving situation and will be adapted as circumstances dictate. In that regard, I can assure the Deputy that I will continue to work with my colleagues across Government and all stakeholders to examine further assistance to businesses impacted by Covid-19.

My former colleagues, the then Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Shane Ross and the then Minister of State for Tourism and Sport, Brendan Griffin, recently established a special Tourism Recovery Taskforce with an Independent Chair, dedicated to spearheading economic recovery for the tourism sector and ancillary activities to prepare recommendations on how best the Irish tourism sector can adapt and recover and to identify priority aims, key enablers and market opportunities for the sector for the period 2020-2023.

IDA Ireland

42. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the position regarding the establishment of a regional IDA science and technology park or equivalent for Castlebar, County Mayo, to enhance the competitiveness of the county globally for inward investment and ensure balanced and sustainable job creation in the county (details supplied). [15691/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment my focus is to lead our country through the economic crisis that has been caused by the pandemic to get our businesses open and our people back to work. My Department, IDA Ireland and the other enterprise agencies under my remit are doing everything possible to support businesses and get people safely back to work, whether in Mayo or elsewhere.

IDA Ireland's results for the first six months of this year have demonstrated the particular resilience of our foreign direct investment (FDI) base. Despite the challenges we have faced this year - over 130 investments to date in 2020, which have the potential to create almost 10,000 jobs. Almost half of these new projects were secured for locations outside Dublin, with 53 investments from companies investing in Ireland for the first time.

Mayo has experienced year-on-year increases in employment by IDA client companies since 2013, with 108 net new jobs created in 2019. There are now 17 IDA client companies in the county employing nearly 5,000 people. Mayo is home to a number of particularly prominent multinationals - such as Allergan, Baxter Healthcare and Coca Cola - that continue to perform well.

As the Deputy notes in his question, the IDA's Business and Technology Park in Castlebar has also helped to attract FDI to the County. Last September, I had the honour of visiting this Business Park to attend the official opening of Fort Wayne Metals' new manufacturing facility, which will create more than 80 new jobs over the next five years. Whilst there are currently no plans in place to establish a new science and technology park in Castlebar, the IDA continues to review its property and land portfolio on an ongoing basis, in line with the strong emphasis

it places on FDI in regional Ireland. Regional development, including for the West, will also again be at the heart of the forthcoming new IDA strategy and I will bring the Deputy's proposal to their attention.

Departmental Strategies

43. **Deputy Cathal Berry** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the steps he is taking to support remote working within his Department, its agencies and through the funding supports provided to business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15684/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As our country enters a new normal, remote working is now more important than ever. Last December my department published the Remote Work in Ireland report. This outlined the prevalence and types of remote working in existence in Ireland. It also identified influencing factors on the part of both employers and employees.

One of the findings of the report was the need for further guidance for employers and employees. My department is now working to deliver guidance that will fill that need. An Inter-departmental Group, consisting of relevant departments and agencies, has been formed to steer the delivery of this guidance.

The 'Guidance for Working Remotely during COVID-19' webpage is a central access point for all of the Government guidance currently available on remote working. The allows employers and employees to navigate the existing guidance easily and helps to inform those working from home during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last week we launched a public consultation on remote working guidance. This consultation will help us to understand what remote working issues are most pressing for employers and employees. The submissions that we receive will allow us to identify areas where further guidance can be provided and will also shape future remote working policy. I encourage all interested parties to take part in this consultation, the full details of which can be found on my department's website. It is open until August 7th.

Following the results of the consultation, we will work to further refine the current remote working guidance. This work will be completed later this year.

Remote working is also an important part of the work of the enterprise agencies. For example, Enterprise Ireland's regional plan, 'Powering the Regions' emphasises the importance of smart working and commits to the creation of co-working spaces. To date, Enterprise Ireland has invested over €180 million in Enterprise Centres, Incubator Hubs and shared office space.

IDA Ireland are also aware of the potential business benefits of remote working. In collaboration with Laois Offaly Education and Training Board (ETB), SOLAS and Grow Remote, the IDA have recently launched two new online national training programmes in response to COVID-19. These courses aim to develop the capability and capacity of current remote workers, future remote workers and line managers nationally.

Through all of these initiatives, my department aims to facilitate the further development of remote working in our country.

Brexit Preparations

44. **Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation his plans to deal with a no-deal Brexit; if businesses along the Border will be supported by measures that will lessen the impact of a no-deal Brexit; and the measures he is considering to help businesses through a no-deal Brexit (details supplied). [15749/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department and its agencies have put in place extensive supports, schemes and advisory resources to ensure that businesses around the country are prepared for Brexit. These measures aim to assist businesses in identifying key risk areas and the practical preparatory actions they can take in response to the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

InterTradeIreland's [ITI] Brexit Advisory Service offers a focal point for businesses working to navigate changes in cross-border trading relationships as a result of Brexit. As part of this service, ITI has run a series of awareness-raising events to help improve knowledge of customs processes and procedures, as well as identifying actions businesses can take in areas like logistics and supply chain management.

ITI's Brexit Planning Voucher enables eligible businesses to seek professional advice on how best to plan and prepare for Brexit. This support helps businesses obtain advice on specific areas such as tariffs, currency management, and regulatory and customs issues. Vouchers are worth up to €2,250 (inclusive of VAT) each.

ITI has also launched a further financial support in the form of the Brexit Implementation Voucher, which offers financial support up to £5,000/€5,625 (inclusive of VAT), with InterTradeIreland paying 50% towards implementing critical changes in relation to Brexit matters.

The network of Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) around the country is the first-stop-shop for anyone seeking guidance and support on starting or growing their business, including businesses in the border counties. The LEOs have organised various events to enable companies to learn about the potential impacts and opportunities of Brexit. The LEOs also offer customs training workshops to support businesses trading with third countries in advance of the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

The LEOs also engage in a number of other schemes to help businesses prepare for Brexit. The Technical Assistance Grant for Micro Export is offered as an incentive for LEO clients to explore and develop new market opportunities.

The six LEOs in the Border region are also working together with their Northern Ireland counterparts under the EU Co-Innovate Programme. The aim of Co-Innovate is to give SMEs from the manufacturing and tradable services sectors in the eligible regions the tools and tailored support to help them to innovate, differentiate and compete successfully.

The Brexit Loan Scheme provides relatively short-term working capital, for up to three years, to eligible businesses with up to 499 employees to help them innovate, change or adapt to mitigate their Brexit challenges. The scheme is open to eligible businesses from all regions of the country, including those in the Border counties. Dublin aside, the most recent quarterly report shows that the border region is the most active region in terms of eligibility applications for the scheme.

The Future Growth Loan Scheme provides a longer-term facility, for 8-10 years, of up to €300m to support strategic capital investment for a post-Brexit environment at competitive rates. This scheme has been jointly funded by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make available loans of €100,000 (€50,000 for primary agriculture) to €3 million, with loans of under €500,000 being

provided on an unsecured basis. The scheme is open to eligible Irish businesses, including those in the primary agriculture and seafood sectors, to support strategic, long-term investment in a post-Brexit environment. As of 3 July, there have been 4,200 eligibility applications received, of which 3,960 have been approved and 1,126 loans progressed to sanction at bank level to a value of €244.34 million.

Enterprise Ireland [EI] has established a Prepare for Brexit online portal and communications campaign, as well as an online “Brexit SME Scorecard” to help Irish businesses self-assess their exposure to Brexit and a “Be Prepared Grant” to support SME clients in planning to mitigate risks arising from Brexit. It has also launched a new Eurozone Strategy to help SMEs broaden their export footprint beyond the UK.

EI’s Customs Insights course helps businesses looking at customs for the first time to understand the key customs concepts, documentation and processes. The course advises on the key actions companies can take to prepare for Brexit and highlights the various supports available.

While we have seen strong uptake of the Brexit supports available to businesses, I am conscious that the prolonged uncertainty around the Brexit process may have led businesses to have deferred their preparations, and that this has likely been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important to understand that the UK’s withdrawal from the EU will bring change for Irish businesses and I want businesses, particularly those around the Border counties to know my Department and agencies are here to help.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

45. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number and value of grants disbursed under the restart grant scheme since its inception; the average grant disbursed under the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15816/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Restart Grant was launched on 22 May 2020 and is a critically important tool to support small businesses to reopen their doors and get back on their feet. Grant payment available range from a minimum of €2,000 up to €10,000 available. The scheme was devised in recognition of the fact that micro and small businesses were and are particularly vulnerable to the economic effects of Covid-19.

Using funding allocated by Enterprise Ireland for the Scheme, the Local Authorities are the granting authority in each of their respective areas in accordance with the criteria for the Scheme and the Local Authorities make grant payments to the bank account of qualifying businesses, in accordance with the scheme.

The Restart Grant is just one part of a wider assistance package for business and for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, the pandemic unemployment payment for the self-employed, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs. Within the funding available so far, the priority has been to assist those who have suffered most, including closure of the business, but whom will still have incurred ongoing costs.

The unprecedented circumstances of the COVID19 global pandemic has resulted in a swiftly evolving landscape for enterprises. I will continue to use all available tools at my disposal to support businesses and ensure their survival.

14 July 2020

As of 10 July 2020, 40,506 businesses have applied for €141.7 million in grants. A total sum of €94,795,163 in grants has been disbursed to businesses by local authorities to date, in respect of 23,326 applications.

A further sum of €15,044,550 is due to be paid in respect of applications which have recently been approved.

Since disbursements began in June, based on the total value of grants and the number of approved applications, the average approved grant per week has been circa €4,000.

Employment Rights

46. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation his plans to safeguard the pay and rights of construction, cleaning and security workers affected by a recent High Court judgment (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15809/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): In June, the High Court found that Statutory Instrument 251 of 2019 was made outside the powers of the Industrial Relations Act 2015. It was also found that the legislative framework governing the sectoral employment process is unconstitutional. This is because of the manner, in the judge's ruling, in which the process is delegated to bodies outside these Houses and the lack of clear guidance in relation to how to balance competing interests in drawing up sectoral employment orders.

As set out in the House on Thursday, July 9th, it has been decided to appeal that decision. Once the Orders which must be completed by the High Court before this ruling has legal effect have been perfected, an appeal will be lodged in the Court of Appeal and in the Supreme Court.

This is an area of legislation that has proven very litigious over the past fifteen years, with significant constitutional issues being called into question. The Industrial Relations Act 2015 was a major piece of legislation that sought to deal with those issues, and we must now await the outcome of appeal process to understand where we go on this issue next and before we commit to any further legislation.

The Employment Regulation Orders that govern the minimum rates of pay and terms and conditions in the contract cleaning and security sectors, agreed by Joint Labour Committees, are not affected by this ruling and those terms continue to apply for existing workers as well as new entrants.

Enterprise Support Services

47. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the initiatives his Department is taking to support enterprises with significant reliance on seasonal business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15795/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department has developed a range of proposals which I have brought to the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment for consideration. These proposals, along with others from Ministerial colleagues, will be developed and adjusted further for the Government's consideration of an ambitious stimulus package which will be announced soon.

There are some welcome signs of improvement in business activity and the economy. However, sectors that employ a lot of people, such as tourism and hospitality, arts and entertainment and other services that rely on social interaction, remain in serious difficulty and their recovery prospects are highly uncertain.

The July Stimulus needs to help all firms meet the fixed, non-wage costs incurred during lockdown and in re-opening. Our current Restart Grant is a help, but I recognise it has limitations which are preventing it from having a deeper and wider impact.

In improving access to finance, there is a need to not only guarantee credit but do so in a way which does not add costs to businesses unduly. As well as this, and looking to the long-term, the important area of seed and venture capital needs strengthening.

The Local Enterprise Offices are the ‘First Stop Shop’ for anyone seeking information about supports available for businesses. Located in the 31 Local Authorities Offices nationwide, 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. The LEOs can also offer advice and guidance in areas such as Local Authority rates, Public Procurement and other regulations affecting business.

I would urge seasonal businesses to talk to their Local Enterprise Offices regarding the supports available as they offer advice, training and mentoring which could be extremely beneficial to a business.

The full range of Enterprise Ireland, Local Enterprise Office (LEO) and Údarás na Gaeltachta grant supports will be available to firms to help with strategies to innovate, diversify markets and supply chains and to improve competitiveness. For seasonal businesses wishing to have an on-line presence, the Local Enterprise Office trading on-line voucher is designed to assist small businesses with up to 10 employees. It offers financial assistance of up to €2,500 along with training and advice to help your business trade online. It should however be noted that it is a requirement of the scheme that a business be operational for 6 months to be eligible to apply for this scheme.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

48. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if he will consider extending the restart grant, which is administered by the local authorities, to include non-rate-paying businesses. [15763/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Restart Grant was launched on 22 May 2020 and is a critically important tool to support small businesses to reopen their doors and get back on their feet. Grant payments range from a minimum of €2,000 up to €10,000. The scheme was devised in recognition of the fact that micro and small businesses were and are particularly vulnerable to the economic effects of Covid-19.

Using funding allocated by Enterprise Ireland for the Scheme, the Local Authorities are the granting authority in each of their respective areas in accordance with the criteria for the Scheme and the Local Authorities make grant payments to the bank account of qualifying businesses, in accordance with the scheme.

The Restart Grant is just one part of a wider assistance package for business and for firms

of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, the pandemic unemployment payment for the self-employed, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs. Within the funding available so far, the priority has been to assist those who have suffered most, including closure of the business, but whom will still have incurred ongoing costs.

The unprecedented circumstances of the COVID19 global pandemic has resulted in a swiftly evolving landscape for enterprises. I will continue to use all available tools at my disposal to support businesses and ensure their survival.

The grant scheme has been broadly welcomed by business owners who benefited from it. However, I am aware of certain exclusions as the application and assessment processes have been rolled out. In accordance with the Service Level Agreement between the Department of Business Enterprise and Innovation, the Local Authorities and Enterprise Ireland, a review has commenced to identify the effectiveness of the Scheme. This review is also in line with an undertaking given in the Programme for Government, to carry out a general review of the Restart Grant. This review has now commenced in my Department and will be completed shortly and form an important input to Government's considerations for the forthcoming Recovery Plan.

Departmental Strategies

49. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation his plans to incentivise behaviour that supports Covid-19 national public health priorities, in particular remote working; and when the strategy for remote working to facilitate employees in working from home or from co-working spaces in rural areas will be published to support the retention of skilled young persons in rural communities. [15690/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): In the wake of COVID19, our country is approaching a new normal. In this new normal remote work will be more important than ever. If implemented correctly, remote work can stimulate regional growth, support the transition to a greener economy, reduce business costs and improve employees' work-life balance.

For this to be possible, the necessary supports must be in place for business and employees to reap benefits. This is reflected in research undertaken by my department on Remote Work in Ireland in December 2019. This report outlined the prevalence and types of remote working in Ireland. It also identified the influencing factors for both employers and employees.

Last week my Department launched a public consultation on remote working guidance. This consultation will help us to understand what remote working issues are most pressing for employers and employees. The submissions that we receive will allow us to identify areas where further guidance can be provided. I encourage all interested parties to take part in this consultation, the full details of which can be found on my department's website.

The results of the consultation will be used to further refine the current remote working guidance. The insights arising from the consultation will also help to shape future policy decisions on remote working strategy. The last date for submissions for the consultation is August 7th 2020. It is expected that the remote working guidance will be completed by the end of this year.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

50. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if measures are being put in place to ensure that companies with sufficient cash reserves are not unnecessarily availing of Covid-19 financial support thus reducing the pool of funds available for those companies that need it. [15767/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Deputy will be aware that there is a delicate balance to be struck between providing necessary survival assistance to firms and ensuring that both deadweight and displacement are avoided.

The vast majority of businesses are microenterprises, estimated at over 200,000, employing less than 10 people and certainly evidence suggests that these firms will not be in a position to meet urgent liquidity needs from their internal resources, including cash reserves without additional support.

Such assistance and the design of measures to help business, as I stated, involve delicate trade-offs in their selection and design to ensure that the overall costs do not outweigh the benefits.

The State-supported loan schemes operated by the Strategic Bank Corporation of Ireland, namely the COVID-19 Working Capital Scheme, the Future Growth Loan Scheme and Credit Guarantee Scheme and the MicroFinance Ireland (COVID-19 Business Loans), make lending available to businesses that have been negatively impacted by the outbreak of COVID-19. These are loans and must be repaid with interest. It is therefore advantageous for businesses with sufficient cash reserves to continue to operate from those reserves, rather than to avail of these supports and incur additional costs.

In relation to Enterprise Ireland and the Local Enterprise Offices, there are specific criteria laid down for each scheme of support and companies must meet these criteria to be successful in their applications.

These supports are part of the overall package of Government support measures for enterprise, and are designed to meet funding needs that cannot be met elsewhere (whether from the company itself or other funding providers).

Enterprise Ireland financial supports for COVID-19 have the objective of supporting companies impacted by COVID-19 to access liquidity and to underpin their long-term viability.

The Sustaining Enterprise Fund of up to €800k, for example, is structured to support a co-financed business stabilisation plan. There is a robust due diligence process in place. In that regard, specific criteria are examined during the application and decision-making process which include the impact that COVID-19 has had on the company and the company's liquidity or funding need. Included are considerations as to how individual firms might respond to that impact and to rebuild the company's financial position including the ability of the company to access funding from other sources. The proposal for funding is submitted to Enterprise Ireland's Investment Committee which is composed of both internal members from Enterprise Ireland, external private sector members and Departmental Officials which ultimately approves the funding to the company.

For LEO grant applications, the applicants have to provide certified accounts if already in business. Their financial health, including cash reserves, is evaluated by the Local Enterprise Office Evaluation and Approvals Committee (EVAC) when considering a grant proposal. Under the assessment criteria, evaluation committees' pay due regard to the general principle of need for necessary funding to ensure the establishment or development of the enterprise including

whether there is sufficient cash available that would support a project without state support.

As stated in the Programme for Government, we will bring forward a July stimulus to assist businesses to remain open, to encourage economic growth and to help restore employment. Our focus is to support the viability of the business and enterprise sector and to get people back to work as quickly as possible in all sectors.

Helping our SMEs is central to this, given their pivotal role in the economy and employment growth. The July Stimulus will extend, enhance and add to the existing measures totalling €12bn in supports for COVID-19 impacted businesses already announced.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

51. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if a review of the policy with regard to data centres will be undertaken in view of the fact that data centre development is projected to add at least 1.5 million tonnes to carbon emissions here by 2020 and the obligations under climate change legislation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15975/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Ireland has one of Europe's largest clusters of data centres as a stable energy grid, temperate climate and significant skills base makes Ireland an attractive country for this form of investment. Data centres are an increasingly important part of the digital and communications sectors, and are core infrastructure in the remote working and digital services economy. The 2018 Government Statement on Data Centres sets out the strategic importance of data centres to Ireland's overarching enterprise policy and their role in attracting employment and investment to Ireland within the technology sector.

Data centres are also considerable energy demand loads on our electricity grid. Ireland has an ambitious target for decarbonising our electricity supply, with the Climate Action Plan 2019 setting a target of 70% renewable electricity by 2030. The Department for Climate Action is progressing the Renewable Energy Support Scheme (RESS) and a series of capacity auctions designed to help us reach that target.

As significant electricity purchasers, data centres in Ireland can help drive the transition to renewable electricity, ensuring that the digital services they provide for society are delivered in an efficient and environmentally sustainable way. Indeed, many of the large technology multinationals with data centres in Ireland have made commitments to achieve 100% renewable energy.

Under the 2019 Climate Action Plan and the Government Statement, the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland are leading a working group to encourage investment in renewable electricity generation using Corporate Power Purchase Agreements (CPPA). The use of these contracts, which facilitate large energy users such as data centres to procure renewable energy directly from generators, has already begun in Ireland. The Working Group is examining what policy actions can be taken to facilitate this market and my Department is participating on this group, with engagement from the enterprise agencies. Through direct procurement of additional renewable electricity, large energy users would be contributing to meeting Ireland's renewable electricity target.

Commissions of Investigation

52. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach the controls in place to ensure that the commission of investigation into the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation will achieve its objective in a timely and cost-effective manner. [14716/20]

The Taoiseach: The IBRC Commission is fully independent and it is solely a matter for the Commission to carry out its investigation in a timely and cost effective manner. Neither I or my Department have any input or role in the operations of the Commission.

The IBRC Commission was established in June 2015 by a Government Order which was approved in draft by the Dail and Seanad, with terms of reference set following consultations with Opposition representatives. Judge Brian Cregan is the Commission's Sole Member.

As required under the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004, at the time of the Commission's establishment my Department published in *Iris Oifigiúil* a Statement of Costs and Timeframe in relation to the Commission. The Statement of Costs and Timeframe indicated that it was expected the Commission would report by the end of 2015, subject to section 6 (6) of the Act, and that the estimated salary costs, legal fees and administrative costs for the Commission in 2015 was €4 million.

The Statement of Costs and Timeframe also made it clear that third party costs might arise and that guidelines concerning third party costs would be prepared. In this regard the Commission's Legal Costs Guidelines were subsequently agreed and have also been published.

Since the Commission was established, Judge Cregan has requested multiple extensions to its deadline for reporting on the Siteserv transaction in the Interim Reports he has provided my predecessors as Taoiseach under section 33 (3) of the Act.

On each of these occasions, consultations took place between my predecessors and Opposition representatives to discuss the issues arising in the Commission's Interim Reports, including the request for extensions by the Commission and the estimated increase in costs, before such extensions were granted.

Most recently, in February 2020 Judge Cregan requested a further extension of the Commission's deadline for reporting in relation to the Siteserv transaction until the end of 2020. In view of the pressures arising in relation to Covid-19 and talks on the formation of a new Government, the Commission's timeframe for reporting was extended until end-June and then end-September 2020 pending consultation with Oireachtas representatives, which I hope to arrange shortly.

From the date of its establishment to 8th July 2020, the IBRC Commission spent a total of €7,990,162, excluding third party legal costs that have been incurred but not yet paid. The Commission has estimated that the final cost of the completion of the first module of its investigation, will be from €11 - €14 million. However, this estimate assumes the investigation is completed in accordance with the timetable stated by the Commission and excludes costs or delays associated with judicial review hearings. The Commission also acknowledges that it involves a substantial degree of uncertainty regarding the amount of costs actually recoverable by parties before the Commission, and it assumes the Commission's Legal Costs Guidelines are not successfully challenged. My Department has given its view on many occasions, including in briefings with Oireachtas representatives, that the final cost is likely to significantly exceed the Commission's estimate, and could exceed €30m.

Covid-19 Pandemic

53. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Taoiseach when updated data will be released by elec-

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toral division further to the release of Covid-19 cases up to 12 June 2020 by electoral division by the Central Statistics Office. [14815/20]

The Taoiseach: The COVID-19 deaths and cases series published by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) aims to provide insights on those who have either died or contracted COVID-19, by using data from the Computerised Infectious Disease Reporting (CIDR) provided to the CSO by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre.

The Electoral Division map published in bulletin 5 on 19 June 2020 detailed the geographic distribution of cases up to 12 June 2020.

Under the Statistics Act 1993 the CSO is obliged to ensure individuals are not directly or indirectly identifiable in data published by the Office. While the number of weekly cases remains low the CSO has no plans to update this map.

Ministerial Responsibilities

54. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will provide a copy of the departmental briefings received by him and each Minister of State in his Department upon taking up each individual role. [14853/20]

The Taoiseach: As the role of the Taoiseach is set out in the Constitution, the Ministers and Secretaries Acts and other statutes, no specific briefing paper was prepared on my appointment. Any statutory functions to be carried out by the Ministers of State in my Department will be delegated to them by way of Government Order.

Ministerial Remuneration

55. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach the super junior Minister of State who will not be receiving the extra supplementary payment for sitting at the Cabinet table. [14898/20]

The Taoiseach: This matter is under review and a decision has not yet been made.

Ministerial Advisers

56. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach the details of his advisers; and the salaries and remuneration they will each receive. [14922/20]

The Taoiseach: Having appointed Ministers and Ministers of State to their various portfolios across Government, I am also considering the advisory supports that I might need in my role as Taoiseach and Head of Government. While I have not as yet fully finalised the make-up of my team, it currently consists of a Chief of Staff at Deputy Secretary level, a Deputy Chief of Staff at Assistant Secretary level and 3 Special Advisers at Principal Officer level. It is also my intention to shortly appoint an adviser with relevant expertise on economic policy.

It should be noted that all of the above appointments are subject to Government approval and relevant contracts will be laid before the Oireachtas in due course.

Departmental Data

57. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach the additional roles and changes being put in place in the offices of An Taoiseach, An Tánaiste and the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport that were not in place previously; and the amount the roles and changes will cost in each area in tabular form. [14984/20]

The Taoiseach: As outlined in the Programme for Government, a number of reforms will be implemented in order to ensure openness and constructive co-operation within government. These include the establishment of an Office of the Tánaiste and an Office of the Leader of the Green Party within the Department of the Taoiseach, located in Government Buildings. The purpose of these offices is to support both the Tánaiste and the Leader of the Green Party in the coordination and implementation of policy within Government. While the details of the roles and staffing of these offices have not been finalised, it is anticipated that, in addition to civil service support, the Office of the Tánaiste will consist of approximately 5 or 6 Special Advisers and the Office of the Leader of the Green Party will consist of approximately 4 or 5 Special Advisers. Appointments to these offices will be made in line with the Public Service Management Act, 1997.

Taoiseach's Communications

58. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Taoiseach if he has spoken with the President of the United States of America since his appointment as Taoiseach. [15061/20]

59. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Taoiseach the Heads of Government in the European Union he has spoken with since his appointment; and the nature of those discussions. [15062/20]

60. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Taoiseach his counterparts he has spoken to since his appointment as Taoiseach. [15269/20]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 58 to 60, inclusive, together.

Since taking office I have spoken with a number of EU leaders including: President of the European Council Charles Michel, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, Portuguese Prime Minister, Antonio Costa, and President of Lithuania, Gitanas Nausėda.

I also spoke with the EU's Chief Negotiator on Brexit, Michel Barnier and with Commission Vice President, Maros Sefcovic.

Discussions covered current EU issues including: developments in relation to Covid19; the proposed 'Next Generation EU' recovery fund; the Union's budget for 2021-27, the MFF; Brexit, including negotiations of the EU's future relationship with the UK and implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement, including the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland.

I also spoke with UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, including on Covid19 and respective plans to ensure economic and social recovery; Brexit; and our shared commitment to the Good Friday Agreement.

I have also spoken with Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford, and the first and Deputy First Ministers of Northern Ireland, Arlene Foster and Michelle O'Neill.

I have not spoken with the President of the United States of America since my appointment as Taoiseach.

Public Inquiries

61. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach the number of tribunals, public investigations and commissions of investigations in process; the length of time each has been under way; when each will conclude; the cost to date of each; and the estimated cost of each at completion. [15534/20]

The Taoiseach: The two Commissions of Investigation for which I am the specified Minister under the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004 are the NAMA Commission of Investigation, for which Judge John Cooke is the Sole Member, and the IBRC Commission of Investigation, for which Judge Brian Cregan is the Sole Member. Both Commissions are fully independent in their investigations.

The NAMA Commission of investigation was established by Government Order on 13 June 2017 following consultation with Oireachtas parties. In June 2020 the Commission was granted an extension of its deadline for reporting on the initial phase of its work until the end of September 2020. From the date of its establishment to 8 July 2020, the NAMA Commission has spent a total of €2,592,934. My Department originally estimated that the final cost of the Commission, including third party legal costs was likely to be approximately €10m.

The IBRC Commission of investigation was established by Government Order on 16 June 2015, following consultation with Oireachtas parties. Its timeframe was subsequently extended on a number of occasions following consultation with Oireachtas parties. In February 2020 Judge Cregan requested an extension of the Commission's deadline for reporting in relation to the Siteserv transaction until the end of 2020. In view of the pressures arising in relation to Covid-19 and talks on the formation of a new Government, the Commission's timeframe for reporting was extended until end-June and then end-September 2020 pending consultation with Oireachtas representatives.

From the date of its establishment to 8th July 2020, the IBRC Commission spent a total of €7,990,162, excluding third party legal costs that have been incurred but not yet paid. The Commission has estimated that the final cost of the completion of the first module of its investigation, will be from €11 - €14 million. However, this estimate assumes the investigation is completed in accordance with the timetable stated by the Commission and excludes costs or delays associated with judicial review hearings. The Commission also acknowledges that it involves a substantial degree of uncertainty regarding the amount of costs actually recoverable by parties before the Commission, and it assumes the Commission's Legal Costs Guidelines are not successfully challenged. My Department has given its view on many occasions, including in briefings with Oireachtas representatives, that the final cost is likely to significantly exceed the Commission's estimate, and could exceed €30m.

The Deputy will also wish to note that the Moriarty Tribunal was established in 1997 and published its Final Report in March 2011.

Following publication of that Report, the Tribunal remains in place with a reduced legal and administrative staff to deal with outstanding legal matters and wind it down to a conclusion.

Total expenditure by my Department from the establishment of the Moriarty Tribunal in 1997 to date is €65.509 million.

Covid-19 Pandemic

62. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Taoiseach if planning for phase 4 of the revised Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business retains social distancing measures; if further detail will be provided on planning for phase 4; and when the general public will be advised of the measures that will follow phase 4. [15875/20]

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

Phase 4 is due to commence on July 20th, subject to Government approval. Government will meet this week to consider phase 4 measures and will advise the public of any decisions thereafter.

It is necessary to adapt to the reality of living for the foreseeable future in the context of this prevailing global pandemic, living our lives in new and different ways. Personal behaviour changes such as hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, physical distancing, appropriate use of face coverings, avoiding crowds and knowing the symptoms are even more important now and into the future, not only to guard against the spread of the COVID-19 virus as the restrictive measures are eased, but also to protect against the spread of respiratory and many other infectious diseases. Limiting our social interactions is crucial to preventing the spread of the virus. Personal responsibility and judgement are more important than ever.

It is also important that there is a continued commitment from across society - from all arms of the State, organisations, employers, businesses and individuals - to work together to collectively promote and adhere to the core public health principles.

Beyond phase four, Government will continue to focus on a clear consistent sustained accessible risk communication strategy with the public and other key groups, to continually re-emphasise collective behaviours and solidarity in limiting the spread of infection for the foreseeable future and support the desired behavioural change through ongoing communication and education initiatives.

The Department of Health will continue to closely monitor the epidemiology of the disease and advise Government accordingly.

Farm Safety

63. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation his plans to improve farm safety nationally. [14909/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The agriculture sector, unfortunately, remains one of the most high-risk sectors in terms of workplace fatalities and injuries. So far this year, of the twenty-nine workplace fatalities reported to the Health and Safety Authority fourteen have been in that sector and tragically, three of these involved young children.

The agriculture sector is different to other sectors in a number of aspects. Farms as well as being workplaces are usually homes with children and the elderly also living on the farm. Many farmers are part time or have employment off the farm.

The Health and Safety Authority has an extensive agriculture health and safety programme which focusses on the provision of advice, guidance, e-tools and educational supports as well

as inspections and investigations. This programme is completed in a collaborative manner with key farming stakeholder groups and relevant Government Departments and State Agencies. The focus of these efforts is to put measures in place that can prevent the high levels of injuries and fatalities in the agriculture sector.

In the past few weeks, the Health and Safety Authority ran a Farm Safety Media Campaign, designed to promote the farm safety message, particularly regarding tractor safety, through TV, Radio, Farming Press and social media platforms. The Health and Safety Authority also participated in TV interviews focusing firstly on child safety on farms during the COVID lockdown and, secondly, in response to examples of poor behaviour by young farmers featuring on social media. It also conducted a specific Livestock Safety Campaign in the first quarter 2020 during which 340 Livestock Safety inspections were carried out in addition to routine inspections.

With the announcement of Government restrictions due to COVID-19, the Health and Safety Authority continued to investigate farm fatalities, but proactive farm safety inspections were suspended. In recent weeks, the inspectors of the Health and Safety Authority have focussed inspections on sectors and businesses reopening post-lockdown with a particular emphasis on compliance issues relating to the Return to Work Safely Protocol.

However, the Health and Safety Authority are now resuming routine inspections across all sectors, including agriculture, and in that regard, are running a farm safety campaign from 13 July for two weeks focusing on tractor and machinery safety. Many other major stakeholders are also involved in Farm Safety Week which is industry led and will run from Monday 20 July. This 2-week campaign will be supported by media advertising including social media.

The Health and Safety Authority and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine will co-fund a farm safety media campaign involving TV, Radio and print media on farm safety later this year. In addition, the Health and Safety Authority will work in close co-operation with Minister Heydon and colleagues in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in order to continue efforts to improve safety on farms.

The Health and Safety Authority is also finalising a New Farm Safety Strategy (2021-2023). This strategy will focus on developing a “safety culture” within the agriculture sector by establishing safety norms through education and awareness raising.

Horizon 2020 Strategy

64. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if a report on Irish involvement in the Horizon 2020 programme has been commissioned; if so, when it will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15119/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Horizon 2020 is the EU Programme to support Research and Innovation. It is one of seven flagship initiatives in Europe 2020, the European Union’s ten-year jobs and growth strategy. Horizon 2020 is the eighth Framework Programme (FP8) developed by the European Commission. The Programme has a budget of €75 billion and runs from 2014 to 2020.

An interim evaluation of Ireland’s participation in Horizon 2020, along with an ex-post evaluation of Ireland’s participation in the 7th Framework Programme was published by my Department in July 2016, and is available on my Department’s website at <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Evaluations-of-Irelands-participation-in-FP7-and-Horizon-2020.html>.

It is planned to commission an ex-post review of Ireland’s participation in Horizon 2020

once the programme has concluded, likely in 2021. Ireland continues to perform strongly in the programme, with more than €950 million awarded to researchers and companies based in Ireland to date.

Health and Safety Inspections

65. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the number of establishments investigated by the HSA for breaches of guidelines on return to work since 29 June 2020 by county and business activity in tabular form. [15132/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As the Deputy will be aware, there is a whole of Government approach to monitoring compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol. The Health and Safety Authority inspectorate has been supplemented by approximately 500 other inspectors from across the system to monitor the application of the Return to Work Safely Protocol. These additional inspectors are drawn from the Workplace Relations Commission, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Environmental Health Officers employed by the Health Service Executive (HSE) and they are checking compliance with the Protocol as part of their normal inspection duties.

Since the start of Phase 3, which included the reopening of the hospitality and tourism sectors, the Environment Health Officers have been particularly active checking businesses in these sectors. I am pleased that a high level of compliance has been reported. In total up to the 8th of July, which is the latest information available, over 6,500 Return to Work Safely inspections were completed by the combined inspectorate. Over 1,400 of these were completed between 29th of June and the 8th of July and many of these inspections focused on the food and tourism sector. Inspection figures are provided at aggregate level on a weekly basis.

In terms of the HSA specifically, overall since the economy reopened to the 8th of July the Authority has carried out 2,236 Return to Work Safely inspections. A sectoral breakdown for the HSA COVID19 inspections for the period in question is attached.

Details of HSA inspections and investigations per economic sector between the week of 29th of June and the 8th of July is set out below;

SECTOR	NUMBER
Construction	101
Retail and Wholesale etc.	48
Manufacturing	36
Transport and Storage	19
Agriculture	12
Healthcare and Social care	4
Professional and technical services	4
Accommodation and Food	3
Other Business sectors	22
Total	249

Trade Agreements

66. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the status of the support for the Mercosur trade deal. [15566/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): In June 2019, the EU reached political agreement in their trade negotiations with the Mercosur region (Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay). The EU-Mercosur Agreement is the EU's largest trade deal to date. The Agreement covers a population of over 770 million with trade in goods and services valued at €122 billion. It aims to reduce and, in some areas, eliminate trade tariffs between the EU and the Mercosur region. In 2019, Ireland exported approximately €0.5 billion worth of goods to the Mercosur region. In 2018 – the latest year for which data is available – services exports to Mercosur totalled almost €1.3 billion. Irish goods exports to Mercosur have grown on average by 2% annually and Mercosur accounts for 0.3% of total Irish goods exports in 2019.

It is anticipated that the EU-Mercosur Agreement will allow Irish exporters to expand faster and will open opportunities across a wide range of sectors – in business services, chemicals, machinery, medical devices and processed food and dairy. The Agreement once ratified, will see a significant reduction or elimination of tariffs and barriers to trade that will allow a cross flow of trading and investment between Ireland and the rest of the EU, and the Mercosur region. The EU-Mercosur Free Trade Agreement will make exports from Ireland more attractive and potentially increase the demand for Irish products.

The Programme for Government Our Shared Future committed the Government to an Economic and Sustainability Impact Assessment of the EU-Mercosur trade deal. That Impact Assessment will produce both a robust analysis of the potential economic impacts as well as the social, human rights and environmental impacts that the trade agreement offers. It will also include a wide-ranging consultation process and engagement with relevant stakeholders and is being produced by an independent economic consultancy firm with the aim of helping to inform future decisions by Government on the Agreement.

I might add that European Trade Commissioner, Phil Hogan, recently reported to the European Parliament's "INTA" International Trade Committee that the final legal texts of the Agreement have been reviewed by lawyers from both parties, a process called "legal scrubbing", and that the final document will now be translated into the various EU and Mercosur languages, a process that is estimated will be completed by October. After this, the Agreement will be submitted by the Commission to the EU Council for the approval of EU Member States and to the European Parliament. My Department's intention, working in conjunction with the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine, is for Government to have the aforementioned Economic and Sustainability Impact Assessment available to us to assist our decision-making on the Agreement in the Autumn.

Departmental Functions

67. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the steps he is taking to support remote working within his Department, its agencies and through the funding supports provided to business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15636/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As our country enters a new normal, remote working is now more important than ever. Last December my Department published the Remote Work in Ireland report. This outlined the prevalence and types of remote working in existence in Ireland. It also identified influencing factors on the part of both employers and employees.

One of the findings of the report was the need for further guidance for employers and em-

ployees. My Department is now working to deliver guidance that will fill that need. An Inter-departmental Group, consisting of relevant departments and agencies, has been formed to steer the delivery of this guidance.

The 'Guidance for Working Remotely during COVID-19' webpage is a central access point for all of the Government guidance currently available on remote working. It allows employers and employees to navigate the existing guidance easily and helps to inform those working from home during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last week we launched a public consultation on remote working guidance. This consultation will help us to understand what remote working issues are most pressing for employers and employees. The submissions that we receive will allow us to identify areas where further guidance can be provided and will also shape future remote working policy. I encourage all interested parties to take part in this consultation, the full details of which can be found on my Department's website. It is open until August 7th.

Following the results of the consultation, we will work to further refine the current remote working guidance. This work will be completed later this year.

Remote working is also an important part of the work of the enterprise agencies. For example, Enterprise Ireland's regional plan, 'Powering the Regions' emphasises the importance of smart working and commits to the creation of co-working spaces. To date, Enterprise Ireland has invested over €180 million in Enterprise Centres, Incubator Hubs and shared office space.

IDA Ireland are also aware of the potential business benefits of remote working. In collaboration with Laois Offaly Education and Training Board (ETB), SOLAS and Grow Remote, the IDA have recently launched two new online national training programmes in response to COVID-19. These courses aim to develop the capability and capacity of current remote workers, future remote workers and line managers nationally.

Through all of these initiatives, my Department aims to facilitate the further development of remote working in our country.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

68. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if the restart grant will be extended to sole traders who do not pay local authority rates in view of the fact that they could not and did not trade due to the effect of the Covid-19 crisis on their business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14736/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Restart Grant is just one part of a wider assistance package for business and for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, the pandemic unemployment payment for the self-employed, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs. Within the funding available, the priority has been to assist those who have suffered most, including closure of the business, but whom will still have incurred ongoing costs.

All COVID-19 Business Schemes are under constant review in terms of the evolving situation and will be adapted as circumstances dictate, including adaptations to the phased opening of our economy. In that regard, I can assure the Deputy that I will continue to work with my colleagues across Government and all stakeholders to examine how best to further assist businesses impacted by Covid-19 as part of the forthcoming Jobs Recovery Plan.

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Full details on all COVID19 measures for business are available at: <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>

My former colleague, the then Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Regina Doherty announced on 25 June that the Department's Enterprise Support Grant will be made available to assist self-employed recipients who are exiting the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) scheme with a once-off grant of up to €1,000 to re-start their business. The grant will be payable to self-employed micro enterprises which employ fewer than 10 people, have an annual turnover of less than €1 million and are not eligible for support from the COVID19 Business Restart Grant or other similar business reopening grants.

Currently, any business (Sole Trader, Partnership or Limited Company) with less than 10 full time employees and annual turnover of up to €2m may apply to Microfinance Ireland for funding from €5,000 – €50,000 where the business is not in a position to avail of finance from Banks and other commercial lending providers. The loan incurs 0% interest for the first six months and Zero repayments. Thereafter a reduced interest rate of 4.5% APR applies to loans applied for through the Local Enterprise Office.

Ministerial Responsibilities

69. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if he will provide a copy of the departmental briefings received by him and each Minister of State in his Department upon taking up the role of Minister; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14796/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The briefing for the new Minister prepared by my Department will be published on my Department's website in the coming days.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

70. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the financial supports available for self-employed persons, including taxi drivers, to assist them getting back to work post Covid-19. [14834/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Government has introduced a €12bn package of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, the pandemic unemployment payment for the self-employed, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs. Full details on all COVID19 supports for business are available at: <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>

Any eligible business, including the self-employed, can apply for the following supports:

MicroFinance Ireland can provide loans of up to €50,000 as an immediate measure to specifically deal with exceptional circumstances that micro-enterprises – (any business -Sole Trader, Partnership or Limited Company with less than 10 full time employees and annual turnover of up to €2m)- are facing.

My former colleague, the then Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Regina Doherty announced on 25 June that the Department's Enterprise Support Grant will be

made available to assist self-employed recipients who are exiting the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) scheme with a once-off grant of up to €1,000 to re-start their business. The grant will be payable to self-employed micro enterprises which employ fewer than 10 people, have an annual turnover of less than €1 million and are not eligible for support from the COVID19 Business Restart Grant or other similar business reopening grants.

I can assure the Deputy that I will continue to work with my colleagues across Government and all stakeholders to examine further assistance to the self-employed, including taxis, impacted by COVID 19 and we will be bringing forward an ambitious July stimulus package shortly.

My colleague, Minister Eamon Ryan T.D., Minister for Transport may be able to provide more specific guidance on supports designed to assist the transport sector, including taxi providers.

Ministerial Responsibilities

71. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for trade promotion; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15052/20]

72. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for employment affairs and retail businesses; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15053/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 71 and 72 together.

My Department is working with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to agree the details of functions to be transferred to my Department, in line with the Taoiseach's announcement of changes to Department structures.

This will inform the delegation of functions to the Ministers of State in my Department.

I will request the Government to approve orders delegating functions to the Ministers of State shortly, once the details are finalised.

Departmental Correspondence

73. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if a reply will issue to proposals set out by an organisation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15073/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I understand the critical role SMEs must play in the national recovery and I welcome all suggestions and inputs such as these proposals referred to by the Deputy. The Government listens carefully to all such suggestions and will consider them as we develop responses to the crisis and put our economy on the path to recovery. Indeed, previous suggestions by this group, such as an SME and State Bodies Group, were considered during the development of the new Programme for Government.

I am acutely aware that the SME sector is facing a financing crisis not of their making.

SMEs have different business models and needs compared to larger businesses and will require specific policy interventions. The business supports introduced in response to the crisis to date have been cognisant of this and any additional and future actions will do the same.

The new Government's job over the next few weeks and months is to help businesses get back on track in every way we can. I have every confidence that an ambitious July Stimulus package will help to "recapitalise small and local businesses" as well as setting our economy on the right course for the future.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

74. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if he will give consideration to the issues raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15081/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 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.

Horizontal supports that are applicable to the Retail Sector include the Working Capital scheme, Future Growth Loan Scheme, COVID-19 Loan from MicroFinance Ireland and the SME Credit Guarantee Scheme. 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.

The objective of the COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme - a competitive scheme, administered on my Department's behalf by Enterprise Ireland, is to support companies in the indigenous retail sector who have already started an online journey, to further enhance and strengthen their online presence, 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 proposed this Scheme in response to the COVID-19 crisis and the urgent need for retail companies to achieve a step change in online capability. Applicant companies must be an indigenous retailer, employing 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.

Under the first call of this scheme I recently announced that 183 retailers will receive funding of between €10,000 and €40,000 under the COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme competitive call totalling €6.5 million. The second call is due to open in the coming weeks.

This Scheme is not about taking the first steps; it is about raising the bar, in an informed, planned and strategic way. Further details on this Scheme available at <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Business-Sectoral-Initiatives/Retail-Sector/COVID-19-Online-Retail-Scheme/>

In addition, there was a major expansion of the Trading Online Voucher Scheme to help small and micro enterprises, with up to 10 employees, including those in the retail sector, to get online quickly.

The Trading Online Voucher Scheme is being expanded by €14.2m after the Local Enterprise Offices received 3 years' worth of applications in 3 months following the outbreak of COVID-19 in Ireland. Following a previous expansion of the Scheme in early April, total additional funding for the Scheme is now almost €20m in 2020.

Under the Scheme, small businesses can claim up to €5,000 in two vouchers worth €2,500 each. The Scheme also facilitates subscriptions to low-cost online retailing platform solutions to quickly establish a retailing presence online. Further details about the expanding Trading Online Voucher Scheme are available at <https://www.localenterprise.ie/Discover-Business-Supports/Trading-Online-Voucher-Scheme/>

I am committed to supporting the needs of the retail sector in developing their online capability and enhancing their competitiveness.

In addition to the above, my Department has developed a range of proposals which I have brought to the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment for consideration. These proposals, along with others from Ministerial colleagues, will be developed and adjusted further for the Government's consideration of an ambitious stimulus package which will be announced soon.

My colleague Damien English, TD, Minister of State with responsibility for Business, Employment and Retail is chair of the Retail Forum and he will continue to liaise with the retail sector during this challenging time.

Covid-19 Pandemic

75. Deputy Mary Lou McDonald asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when live music in venues will recommence; the guidelines that will apply to musicians and venues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15240/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): On 19th June, the Government, having considered the expert public health advice provided by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), approved the rephrasing of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. Apart from some exceptions, the reopening of most sectors was brought forward to Phase 3, which began on Monday 29th June. This includes theatres, concert halls, music venues and other culture outlets. Gatherings of up to 50 people indoors or 200 people outdoors are currently permissible when conducted in line with public health advice. However, specific recommendations apply in relation to singing, choirs and the playing of musical instruments in groups. These are available for review at <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/77452/39d51b02-5633-4e2f-a070-4551a3521081.pdf#page=7>

Phase 4 of Roadmap is due to commence on 20 July, subject to public health advice and Government approval. Gatherings of up to 100 people indoors and 500 people outdoors will be permissible in this phase provided social distancing and relevant public health advice is adhered to.

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 employees 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 National Return to Work Safely 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/>.

I understand the impact that the pandemic is having on the social and cultural life of citizens right across the country. I know that employers, employees and the self-employed in the live music and entertainment sector want to get back to organising events for larger audiences than are currently permitted due to the public health risks associated with COVID-19. I wish to assure all in this sector that I will work with my Government colleagues to secure further details and clarity as we progress through the final phase of the Roadmap and beyond. It is important to note, however, that all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions will be informed by the public health advice at the time.

Covid-19 Pandemic

76. Deputy Neasa Hourigan asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the sanctions for employers that do not follow the published return to work safely protocol, for example, failure to provide masks or to facilitate social distancing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15372/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The national Return to Work Safely Protocol should be used by all workplaces to adapt their procedures and practices to comply fully with the necessary COVID-19 public health measures identified by the HSE and the Department of Health. It operates in parallel with existing statutory workplace health and safety requirements. The Protocol clearly sets out for employers and employees the steps that they must take both before a workplace reopens and on an ongoing basis.

The Health and Safety Authority is the lead agency in monitoring compliance with the Protocol. In this regard, any employee who has concerns about compliance can contact the Health and Safety Authority Workplace Contact Unit (WCU) on a confidential basis at 1890 289 389 or by sending an email to wcu@hsa.ie. If following such a complaint, there are serious concerns about a particular workplace, the Health and Safety Authority, or another agency or tasked with inspecting workplace compliance with the Protocol, will follow-up as appropriate.

In order to achieve compliance with the Protocol the Health and Safety Authority can use its

powers under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 2005. Under this Act there is a suite of enforcement powers ranging from Improvement Directions, up to and including, Prohibition Notices, which an inspector can serve where there is evidence of breaches of legislation. However, any initial engagement with an employer is carried out with the aim of achieving required outcomes through consensus and collaboration e.g. advice, Reports of Inspections (ROI). However a failure to comply with a ROI is an offence.

As part of the whole of Government approach, 500 inspectors from across the public service system are now monitoring adherence to the Protocol as part of their own normal inspection duties and are supplementing the work of the Health and Safety Authority. These resources are drawn from the Workplace Relations Commission, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the cohort of Environmental Health Officers.

In addition to inspections, the Health and Safety Authority continues to provide advice and support to employers and employees on how they are implementing the COVID-19 measures in the workplace through its helpline and website and it has developed checklists and templates for use by employers, workers and worker representatives, and further material is being developed.

Separately, I would add that, overall, the Health and Safety Authority has noted a high level of compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol, to date, across all sectors which is a positive indication that the majority of employers and employees are taking a responsible approach to compliance with the Protocol.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

77. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if specific supports are available for travel management companies and travel agencies as a result of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15429/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Government has introduced a €12bn package of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, the pandemic unemployment payment for the self-employed, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs. Full details on all COVID19 supports for business are available at: <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>

Any eligible business, including the self-employed, can apply for the following supports. The most appropriate support will depend on the characteristics of the business.

MicroFinance Ireland can provide loans of up to €50,000 as an immediate measure to specifically deal with exceptional circumstances that micro-enterprises – (any business -Sole Trader, Partnership or Limited Company with less than 10 full time employees and annual turnover of up to €2m)- are facing.

Local Enterprise Offices have moved training programmes, workshops and networking meet-ups online, covering areas such as cash management in a crisis, leading your business through COVID-19 and advice for employers impacted by the crisis. Training programmes are free of charge and places can be booked online, through your Local Enterprise Office.

My former colleague, the then Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Regina Doherty announced on 25 June that the Department's Enterprise Support Grant will be made available to assist self-employed recipients who are exiting the Pandemic Unemployment

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Payment (PUP) scheme with a once-off grant of up to €1,000 to re-start their business. The grant will be payable to self-employed micro enterprises which employ fewer than 10 people, have an annual turnover of less than €1 million and are not eligible for support from the COVID19 Business Restart Grant or other similar business reopening grants.

I am currently reviewing the full range of supports in place to help businesses, together with my Ministerial colleagues, as we prepare the forthcoming Jobs Recovery Plan and I expect an ambitious stimulus package will be announced soon.

I can assure the Deputy that the Government will not be found wanting. Not only must we address the current challenges, but we must also look ahead.

There are some welcome signs of improvement in business activity and the economy. However, sectors that provided significant employment, such as tourism and hospitality, arts and entertainment and other services that rely on social interaction, remain in serious difficulty and their recovery prospects are highly uncertain.

The July Stimulus will seek to help all firms meet the fixed, non-wage costs incurred during lockdown and in re-opening. The July package will also seek to ensure we are best placed to exploit emerging opportunities and attract high value projects with significant economic benefits and to position our economy and firms to meet future challenges. In the near-term, this includes helping companies further in overcoming the challenges of Brexit, but we also need to include measures that build enterprise resilience and help them transition to a low carbon future.

My colleague, Minister Eamon Ryan T.D., Minister for Transport may be able to provide more specific guidance on supports suitable for the travel sector, including the consumer related measure in the COVID-19 Refund Credit Note which was introduced under consumer related legislation, the package travel and travel trade licensing legislation, for which he has lead responsibility.

Scientific Research

78. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if the application by Ireland to become a full member of CERN will be progressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15526/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Innovation 2020, the national strategy for research and innovation, recognises that for Ireland to become a Global Innovation Leader, our research and innovation system must be open with strong international collaboration links. Membership of leading international research organisations is an important mechanism for facilitating this engagement.

For this reason, the Government gave a specific commitment in Innovation 2020 to initiate discussions with several international research organisations. Four organisations were identified – CERN, the European Southern Observatory, ELIXIR and LOFAR - and membership of three of these organisations has been completed. Ireland continues its consideration of CERN membership.

Under the National Development Plan 2018-2027, as part of Project Ireland 2040, the Government outlined its intention to review Ireland's membership of CERN. This will generate opportunities not only for Irish enterprise but also for its research community. While the benefits of CERN membership are recognised as significant, the cost is also significant and must be

assessed in the context of other Departmental and national investment priorities.

Following the recent government formation, CERN membership will now be considered in the context of the new programme for government and the establishment of a new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research and Innovation. Ireland continues its consideration of full and associate CERN membership and my Department remains in contact with CERN officials.

Enterprise Support Services

79. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if business support policies can be reviewed to provide greater help to micro-businesses that contribute to the national economy on a smaller scale but to the local community on a bigger scale than many other businesses; if he will give consideration to reviewing wage subsidies for casual staff in view of the fact that longer operating hours are now required and wage subsidies should be proportionate to new working hours as opposed to looking at pre-Covid-19 payments; if he will give consideration to offering more direct grants for businesses stay afloat until the end of the Covid-19 emergency as opposed to grants for hiring business consultants; if he will give consideration to offering restart grants to cover the additional costs for trading during the Covid-19 emergency, such as PPE, sanitiser and screens; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15646/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As stated in the Programme for Government, we will bring forward a July Stimulus shortly to support our economy and help restore employment. Our focus is to support the viability of the business and to get people back to work as quickly as possible in all sectors including the hospitality sector.

Helping our SMEs is central to this, given their pivotal role in the economy and employment. The July Stimulus will extend, enhance and add to the existing measures totalling €12bn in supports for Covid-19 impacted businesses already announced.

These measures include direct grants and supports such as the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), the €250m Restart Grant Fund, liquidity supports such as 0% finance for 6 months from MicroFinance Ireland, rates waivers from local authorities and warehousing of tax liabilities of SMEs by Revenue.

These supports are predominately focused on our SMEs, who have been hardest hit by the COVID-19 Pandemic.

We are reviewing the future of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS). As the public health restrictions are eased, the challenge for the economy, SMEs and all businesses is evolving. Work is currently on-going around how best to continue to support employers into the more medium term, including consideration of support for temporary seasonal workers and new hires.

The launch of the €250m Restart Grant on the 22 May last is an example of how we are providing support for the costs of restarting a business, including to meet the costs of refitting of premises to meet health and safety requirements. The Restart Grant provide a direct payment to local businesses of between €2,000 to €10,000 to help them meet the costs of reopening.

The range of supports available from my Department and across Government 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.

The Covid-19 Loan, available from Microfinance Ireland (MFI), was introduced as a support to microenterprises to help them access funding arising from the Covid-19 crisis and is working successfully. In under three months, MFI has approved Covid-19 loans of over €14.3 million, which is more than double the value of total loans approved for the entire year in 2019.

These loans are available for eligible microenterprises responding to Covid-19-related difficulties, the negative impact of which must be a minimum of 15% of actual or projected income or profit. Loans up to €50,000 are available with terms that include a six months interest free and repayment free moratorium, with the loan to then be repaid over the remaining 30 months of the 36-month loan period.

An interest rate to 4.5% applies on the Covid-19 loans provided by MFI. This reduced rate is available to all micro-enterprises where the application is made through the Local Enterprise Network or referred by a bank or Local Development Committees. The new rate for direct applications to MFI is reduced to 5.5%. As these loans are available interest free for the first six months, the net effect is to further reduce the net interest rate payable over the period of the loan.

The Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme is offered 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 million 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 a further announcement, work is now under way on a significant expansion to this Scheme.

The scheme is open to eligible SMEs and small mid-caps (businesses of up to 499 employees) negatively impacted by Covid-19. Loans under the scheme range from €25,000 to €1.5m and are for periods of up to three years. The maximum interest rate under the scheme is 4% and loans of up to €500,000 are available unsecured.

The Trading Online Voucher Scheme is funded by the Department of Communications Climate Action and Environment and delivered nationwide in partnership with my Department, Enterprise Ireland and the 31 Local Enterprise Offices. There has been a tremendous demand for the scheme from enterprises across the country since its expansion and I am pleased that it provides a grant of up to €2,500 to cover up to 90% of the cost for a business going online.

My colleague and former Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Heather Humphreys T.D., announced on the 8th of June an additional funding of €14.2m for the Scheme bringing the total funding allocation in 2020 to €19.8m. This additional funding will allow LEOs to approve additional vouchers to successful applicants. The Scheme offers skills train-

ing, mentoring and financial support of up to €2,500 to help small and micro-businesses to develop their ecommerce capability. New flexibilities to the Scheme were introduced in April including reducing the requirement for co-funding from 50% to 10% and allowing businesses to apply for a second voucher of up to €2,500 where they have successfully utilised their first one. There has been a positive response to these changes and significant uptake of the Scheme.

Continued support for high-potential start-ups and the wider entrepreneurship base remains critically important to underpinning the growth and recovery of Irish enterprise. Through my agency's support for High Potential Start-Ups, Seed and Venture Capital funding, the Competitive Start Fund and New Frontiers Programme, Enterprise Ireland continues to deliver strong support for entrepreneurs and early stage companies.

My former colleague, the then Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Regina Doherty announced on 25 June that the Department's Enterprise Support Grant will be made available to assist self-employed recipients who are exiting the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) scheme with a once-off grant of up to €1,000 to re-start their business. The grant will be payable to self-employed micro enterprises which employ fewer than 10 people, have an annual turnover of less than €1 million and are not eligible for support from the COVID19 Business Restart Grant or other similar business reopening grants.

I can assure the Deputy that I will continue to work with my colleagues across Government and with all stakeholders, to examine all such appropriate business supports to assist microbusinesses impacted by Covid-19.

Departmental Records

80. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if a social insurance record will be provided to a person (details supplied) that worked in the Department of Industry and Commerce from June 1972 to September 1978 for which the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection has indicated it has no records; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15656/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department informs me that they have been and will continue to engage with Ms Kelly on her request for information regarding her social insurance record. The most recent contact with Ms Bridget Alice Kelly was by email on Tuesday 7 July 2020.

The Department will continue to engage and provide information to Ms Kelly. In the event records cannot be located, we will work with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to examine alternative solutions to assist Ms Kelly.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

81. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the supports available to sole traders over 66 years of age that are impacted by Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15696/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Government has introduced a €12bn package of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, the pandemic unemployment payment for the self-employed, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all

of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs. Full details on all COVID19 supports for business are available at: <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>

Any eligible business, including the self-employed, can apply for the following supports. The most appropriate support will depend on the characteristics of the business.

MicroFinance Ireland can provide loans of up to €50,000 as an immediate measure to specifically deal with exceptional circumstances that micro-enterprises – (any business -Sole Trader, Partnership or Limited Company with less than 10 full time employees and annual turnover of up to €2m)- are facing.

Local Enterprise Offices have moved training programmes, workshops and networking meet-ups online, covering areas such as cash management in a crisis, leading your business through COVID-19 and advice for employers impacted by the crisis. Training programmes are free of charge and places can be booked online, through your Local Enterprise Office.

For established traders and companies that meet eligibility criteria, Local Enterprise Offices can also offer financial supports to help manage current market challenges such as Business Priming Grants, Business Expansion Grants, Feasibility Study Grants and Technical Assistance for Micro-Exporters Grant.

The former Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Regina Doherty on 25 June announced that her Department's Enterprise Support Grant will be made available to assist self-employed recipients who are exiting the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) scheme with a once-off grant of up to €1,000 to re-start their business. This will provide business owners with a once-off grant of up to €1,000 to re-start their business. A fund of €12m has been allocated for the extension of this grant. The grant will be payable to self-employed micro enterprises which employ fewer than 10 people, have an annual turnover of less than €1 million and are not eligible for support from the COVID 19 Business Restart Grant or other similar business reopening grants.

I can assure the Deputy that I will continue to work with my colleagues across Government and with all stakeholders, to examine all such appropriate business supports as we prepare the forthcoming Jobs recovery Plan to assist enterprises, including self-employed service providers, impacted by Covid-19.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

82. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the supports available to a self-employed taxi driver impacted by Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15827/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Government has introduced a €12bn package of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, the pandemic unemployment payment for the self-employed, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs. Full details on all COVID19 supports for business are available at: <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>

Any eligible business, including the self-employed, can apply for the following supports.

MicroFinance Ireland can provide loans of up to €50,000 as an immediate measure to specifically deal with exceptional circumstances that micro-enterprises – (any business -Sole Trader, Partnership or Limited Company with less than 10 full time employees and annual turnover of up to €2m)- are facing.

My former colleague, the then Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Regina Doherty announced on 25 June that the Department's Enterprise Support Grant will be made available to assist self-employed recipients who are exiting the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) scheme with a once-off grant of up to €1,000 to re-start their business. The grant will be payable to self-employed micro enterprises which employ fewer than 10 people, have an annual turnover of less than €1 million and are not eligible for support from the COVID19 Business Restart Grant or other similar business reopening grants.

I can assure the Deputy that I will continue to work with my colleagues across Government and all stakeholders to examine further assistance to businesses impacted by Covid-19.

As Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment I am leading on the development of the July stimulus and together with Ministerial colleagues I will be ensuring we deepen and widen the impact of assistance to businesses to remain open and to sustain jobs.

My colleague, Minister Eamon Ryan T.D., Minister for Transport, may be able to provide more specific guidance on supports designed to suit the transport sector, including taxi providers.

Health and Safety Regulations

83. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation further to Parliamentary Question No. 872 of 30 June 2020, if he is satisfied that window restrictors on sale as separate items of hardware that can be fitted to a window after manufacture and are not covered by harmonised European standards are safe to use and adequately regulated and monitored; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15843/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, stated in the answer to Parliamentary Question No. 872 of 30 June 2020, window restrictors are products that are required to be installed in dwellings where a window has an opening section through which a person may fall, (having particular regard to children under five years of age), and is more than 1400 mm above external ground level. Where such window restrictions are an integral part of the window operating gear they come under the remit of the Construction Products Regulation (Regulation (EU) No 305/2011) and fall under the responsibility of my colleague's Department.

In relation to window restrictors that are sold as separate items, which are not covered by EU harmonised standards, these products fall under the remit of the General Product Safety Directive (Directive 2001/95/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 3 December 2001 on General Product Safety). This Directive was transposed into Irish law by S.I. No. 199 of 2004 and thus come within the responsibility of my Department.

Directive 2001/95/EC places the onus on all economic operators – manufacturers, distributors, importers – to ensure that only safe products are placed on the market. If economic operators become aware that products on the market present a potential hazard they must take appropriate measures, up to and including recall of the items, to ensure that the risk is removed.

Any action taken by an operator must be notified to the relevant Market Surveillance Author-

ity: in Ireland this is the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC), which is statutorily independent in the carrying out of its functions.

Where the CCPC finds unsafe products on the Irish market, it will act to ensure economic operators remove the product from the market until it is in compliance with the legislation. The CCPC is part of an EU wide network (known as Safety Gate) that allows for the rapid exchange of information between national market surveillance authorities on dangerous products found on the EU market.

Section 9 (5) of the Competition and Consumer Protection Act 2014 provides that the CCPC is independent in the performance of its functions, including carrying out investigations of unsafe products. As investigations and enforcement matters generally are part of the day-to-day operational work of the CCPC, I, as the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation have no direct function in the matter.

Should the Deputy have any information in relation to unsafe window restrictors on the Irish market, he should make contact with the CCPC directly to provide any relevant information on these matters.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

84. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the measures he will implement to ensure that small businesses have access to loan schemes that were established due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15845/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department has responded swiftly to the needs of businesses since the onset of Covid-19 earlier this year.

The COVID-19 Working Capital Scheme offered through the SBCI is broadly accessible to Covid-19-impacted SMEs and small-mid caps (businesses of fewer than 500 employees). Of the approximately 3,000 eligibility applications to date, only 15 have so far been deemed eligible. This scheme is subject to the participating banks' own credit policies and procedures.

Both myself and my predecessor, Heather Humphreys, have had regular meetings with representatives of the banks to ensure that issues raised by businesses as they apply for lending under these schemes are addressed. At these meetings, the banks have given assurance that they are working through large pipelines of applications for the Government Schemes, and I urged them to prioritise these essential supports for businesses.

The COVID-19 Loan, available from Microfinance Ireland (MFI), was introduced as a support to microenterprises to help them access funding arising from the COVID-19 crisis. These loans are available for eligible microenterprises responding to COVID-19-related difficulties, the negative impact of which must be a minimum of 15% of actual or projected income or profit. Loans up to €50,000 are available with terms that include a six months interest free and repayment free moratorium, with the loan to then be repaid over the remaining 30 months of the 36-month loan period. Interest rates of between 4.5% and 5.5% are available.

Loans of €17.1 million have been approved since the commencement of the Scheme, compared to a total loan value approved in 2019 of €6 million, and a pipeline of applications is being worked through. Due to this unprecedented demand, lending to new applications through this scheme has currently been paused as legislation is required to increase the funding of MFI

which is currently at capacity. This legislation recently passed through the Oireachtas. Micro-finance Ireland and officials from my Department will work together to reopen this Loan Fund as quickly as possible.

I very much welcome the announcement by the European Commission on 29th June 2020 of its adoption of the 3rd amendment to the Temporary Framework. This amendment allows for support to be granted under the Temporary Framework to micro and small enterprises (up to 50 employees with less than EUR 10M annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet), even if they fall under the category of an undertaking in difficulty on 31 December 2019 provided that they are not subject to collective insolvency procedure under national law and have not received rescue or restructuring aid which has not yet been repaid). Such aid is also intended to increase support possibilities to innovative start-ups in the high growth phase which are micro or small in size.

This amendment will apply retrospectively to schemes already developed under the Temporary Framework, including the EI Sustaining Enterprise Fund.

Covid-19 Pandemic

85. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation when pubs can organise and host live gigs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15914/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): On 19th June, the Government, having considered the expert public health advice provided by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), approved the rephrasing of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. Apart from some exceptions, the reopening of most sectors was brought forward to Phase 3, which began on Monday 29th June.

Pubs and hotel bars operating as restaurants have been able to open since the 29th June, subject to the Phases 3 and 4 restrictions on numbers for public gatherings and other important public health advice. Full details are available at www.gov.ie/en/news/58bc8b-taoiseach-announces-roadmap-for-reopening-society-and-business-and-u/

Fáilte Ireland has worked in consultation with the industry to develop detailed and practical guidelines to assist pubs in reopening and they are available at <https://covid19.failteireland.ie/business-supports/business-reopening/pubs/guidelines-for-re-opening/>

These guidelines will be regularly updated in line with Government public health advice as and when this advice evolves. This includes any further guidance that is given following work by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre and NPHE on the application of the existing social distancing requirements in specific, defined and controlled environments in the hospitality industry during periods of low incidence of the disease.

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 employees 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 National Return to Work Safely 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/>.

I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country, particularly those in the hospitality and live entertainment sectors. I know that employers, employees and the self-employed want to get back to work and I support them in that ambition.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

86. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the measures in the July stimulus package for taxi drivers and the taxi industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15953/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As the Deputy will know, the sector referred to in the question relates to the policy responsibility of another Minister but I am happy to outline my position on how best to assist enterprises in the current circumstances and into the future.

Some of the provisions already available include:

- the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment for all employees and the self-employed who have lost their job due to the pandemic;

- 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;

- a €450m Working Capital scheme from the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI); and

- the Enterprise Support Grant for to assist eligible self-employed recipients who are closing the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment scheme after 25th June 2020.

The full list of the business supports is available on my Department’s website.

My Department has developed a range of proposals which I have brought to the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment for consideration. These proposals, along with others from Ministerial colleagues, will be developed further for the Government’s consideration of an ambitious stimulus package which will be announced soon.

I look forward to the details being announced shortly.

Foreign Direct Investment

87. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the extent to which he expects to encourage foreign direct investment in the

future in view of Brexit and the international political scene; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16003/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Recent global developments – both as a result of Brexit and of the COVID-19 pandemic – have undoubtedly had an impact on international foreign direct investment (FDI).

The challenges presented by Brexit are well-documented. The IDA has been working hard with its client base to help address and mitigate any risks faced by overseas companies already located here.

The Agency has also, ever since the EU-UK referendum in June 2016, been seeking to realise opportunities to attract further Brexit-related FDI to Ireland. The significant efforts that the IDA has invested into these efforts have yielded impressive results. The Agency has won 92 Brexit-related investments with an associated jobs potential of 5,900, numbers which could yet increase further.

The IDA has also taken steps to diversify its FDI source markets and to prepare for a potentially significantly changed post-Brexit economic and geopolitical landscape. This has included an international campaign in key markets and a restructuring of its European operations to treat the UK as a separate territory. The Agency has also deployed additional resources in the Middle East, Asia and Latin America, as well as opening a new office in Toronto.

More generally, I am confident that Ireland will remain attractive in the long-term to international investors. Our traditional strengths – including our talented workforce and pro-enterprise policy environment – remain very much intact and valued by overseas firms. I look forward to working, together with the IDA, to increase FDI here in the years ahead.

Job Creation

88. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation his plans to set specific targets for job creation with a view to a major positive impact on the creation of employment in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16004/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): In a few short months, Ireland has gone from a position of record employment to record unemployment and faces an unprecedented challenge in terms of getting people back into employment. The Department of Finance's Stability Programme Update (SPU) published in April indicated that employment is projected to fall substantially with approximately 220,000 jobs being lost this year. The Government's aim is to create 200,000 new jobs by 2025 as well as helping people currently unemployed due to COVID-19 back to work.

Since I took up the role of Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, my focus has been on preparing the July Stimulus Package which will save jobs, create new ones and get our people back to work as quickly as possible. Not only must we overcome the current challenges, but we must also look ahead and set our economy on the right course for the future.

Already there are some welcome signs of improvement in business activity and the economy. However, sectors that employ a lot of people, such as tourism and hospitality, arts and entertainment and other services that rely on social interaction, continue to be in serious difficulty and their recovery prospects are highly uncertain.

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My officials and I have been engaging with colleagues across Government to ensure that the needs of business are to the forefront in the preparation of the July Stimulus package. We know that many viable businesses will need additional support to help see them through the re-opening period and to help them adapt and refocus their business models.

While immediate focus is on preserving existing firms and jobs, the July package should also have an eye to exploiting emerging opportunities and attract high value projects with significant economic benefits. Importantly, the July Initiative must position our economy and firms to meet future challenges. In the near-term, this includes helping companies further in overcoming the challenges of Brexit but we also need to include measures that build enterprise resilience and help them transition to a low carbon future.

Job Creation

89. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the extent to which he can liaise with his colleagues throughout the European Union with a view to maximisation of efforts in a co-ordinated fashion to support job creation in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis and Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16005/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Over the coming months I look forward to working with my EU counterparts both bilaterally and at meetings of the European Council of Ministers in its Employment and Social Affairs, Competitiveness, and Foreign Affairs -Trade configurations. Under the German Presidency we will debate a wide variety of topics at each Council aimed at supporting Member employment policies and enterprises, particularly SMEs, encouraging economic growth and improving the EU's competitiveness, all of which I believe will impact on job creation.

At the Employment and Social Affairs Council, I will engage with my fellow Ministers on key employment challenges facing us, guidelines on employment policies and strengthening minimum income protection. There may also be an opportunity to discuss a new youth employment guarantee. At the Competitiveness Council we will consider how best to strengthen the Single Market for a strong recovery and a competitive, sustainable Europe, and how to develop our enterprises for growth and employment. At the Trade Council I will seek to open new markets and opportunities for Irish companies to grow their exports and so provide new job opportunities.

Alongside the formal Council agendas, I plan to engage bilaterally with my counterparts. Fostering job creation will be part of those discussions.

The Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027, a Budget for European Recovery and Resilience, and the Next Generation EU Recovery Fund is under negotiation. One of the three pillars in the Next Generation EU is focussed on kick-starting the economy by supporting key sectors and technologies, investing in key value chains and providing solvency support for viable companies. This package is on top of funding amounting to €540 billion already agreed, which includes a temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks and protect existing jobs.

I believe that by working together at EU level and rebooting the economy using the Recovery Fund we can generate and enable sustainable economic growth which will support job creation.

Departmental Priorities

90. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the details of the mission statement of his Department in the context of the recovery of Ireland and the European Union following the Covid-19 crisis and the added complication of Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16006/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department will be developing its Statement of Strategy, in consultation with its many stakeholders, in the coming months and within the required time-frame of 6-months.

A core objective of the Department will be to contribute to the formation of an ambitious and effective National Economic Plan. The Department's leadership across a number of Government strategies, including Future Jobs Ireland, will be to the fore in this regard. The focus will not only be on measures which address the current challenges facing the enterprise sector but also on ensuring the long-term viability of Ireland's enterprise base. This will require the transformation of our enterprises to seize strategic opportunities in fast developing sectors and adapt to technological and climate changes under way.

My Department is actively participating in EU Commission considerations of the appropriate trade policy measures that best marry the needs of our response to the pandemic with our strong support for open, rules-based, multilateral trade that supports wealth creation and good jobs. Two key elements include short-term transparent, targeted, temporary and proportionate measures as well as revisions to the EU's guiding trade policy, the review of which opened last month and on which Trade Ministers, including myself, will input to in the autumn.

The Programme for Government commits to the delivery of a National SME Growth Plan that will map out an ambitious long-term strategic blueprint beyond COVID-19. The National SME Growth Plan will be largely informed by the comprehensive OECD Report on "SME & Entrepreneurship Policy in Ireland", which was published last year. It will include detailed proposals to help SMEs to start up, scale up and access foreign markets. It will look at ways to make SMEs more productive and ready for the transition to a digital, green economy. It will also make improvements to areas such as local entrepreneurship ecosystems and local industry clusters to drive regional development. This Plan will be brought to Government for approval as part of the National Economic Plan in October. The Growth Plan will align with and build on existing SME policy initiatives, such as those set out in Future Jobs Ireland.

The Programme for Government identifies a number of groups which will be led by Government in shaping the engagement of enterprise and SMEs in the formulation of the policy responses at the different stages of the recovery:

- Sectoral taskforces to focus on the specific needs of sectors, and to bring forward plans in the context of the National Economic Plan;

- An SME and State Bodies Group, to be chaired jointly by the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Business, to co-ordinate the ongoing response to COVID-19 for SMEs;

- An SME Growth Taskforce, to design a National SME Growth Plan that will map out an ambitious long-term strategic blueprint beyond COVID-19.

The first meeting of the SME and State Bodies Group took place on Friday last. Both myself and the Minister for Finance, along with Ministers of State Damien English and Robert Troy met with business representative groups and State Bodies to discuss SME financing challenges and how to solve these.

Covid-19 Pandemic

91. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the steps to be taken to bring about economic recovery following the economic impact of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16007/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Since I took up the role of Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, my focus has been on preparing the July Stimulus Package which will be radical, of scale and far-reaching. Not only must we overcome the current challenges, but we must also look ahead and set our economy on the right course for the future.

Already there are some welcome signs of improvement in business activity and the economy. However, sectors that employ a lot of people, such as tourism and hospitality, arts and entertainment and other services that rely on social interaction, continue to be in serious difficulty and their recovery prospects are highly uncertain. While we can't keep every firm and job alive, I believe our emphasis should still be to preserve these insofar as we can.

The July package will be followed in October by the National Economic Plan to be published on the same day as the Budget. The National Economic Plan will chart out our longer-term, jobs-led recovery.

I expect the Economic Plan will include a major reskilling programme, policies to promote balanced regional development and it will emphasise the importance of attracting and sustaining Foreign Direct Investment.

Before this crisis the Irish economy was performing stronger than ever. Last year, the Government launched Future Jobs Ireland to help make our economy more resilient and innovative and to facilitate enterprises and workers transition in light of technological development and climate change imperatives. The need to ensure the economy is green, digital and resilient hasn't gone away. Therefore, the Future Jobs Ireland framework will be updated in light of these, the crisis, and new priorities.

Additionally, a new SME Growth Taskforce shortly will be formed with representation from a wide range of business representative bodies and enterprise agencies.

Trade Relations

92. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the extent to which alternative markets continue to be found for Irish products in view of the impact of Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16008/20]

95. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the degree to which efforts continue to be made to identify new markets throughout the European Union and globally for Irish exports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16011/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 92 and 95 together.

Ireland's overall export performance over the last 10 years has been marked by year-on-year growth with total exports of goods and services reaching further record levels of €366Bn in 2019.

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

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

Ministerial-led Trade Missions have supported the Government's major drive towards market diversification. The majority of trade missions in recent years have taken place to the Eurozone, North America and Asia Pacific, which represented the strongest growth opportunities for Irish companies. These Trade Missions focused on promoting the innovative capabilities and competitive offerings of Irish companies to international buyers in sectors including internationally traded services, fintech, high-tech construction, engineering, ICT and lifesciences. Trade Missions will resume as soon as is practicable. In the meantime, promotion of our companies abroad will continue through the work of our State agencies, and in particular their offices located on the ground internationally.

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

Microenterprise Loan Fund

93. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the degree to which he is of the view that the available funding under the microenterprise loan scheme can be made available to a vastly increased number of applicants thereby increasing their chances of recovery and progress in the aftermath of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16009/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The COVID-19 Loan, available from Microfinance Ireland (MFI), was introduced as a support to microenterprises to help them access funding arising from the COVID-19 crisis. These loans are available for eligible microenterprises responding to Covid-19-related difficulties, the negative impact of which must be a minimum of 15% of actual or projected income or profit. Loans up to €50,000 are available with terms that include a six months interest free and repayment free moratorium, with the loan to then be repaid over the remaining 30 months of the 36-month loan period. Interest rates of between 4.5% and 5.5% are available.

MFI provides an essential support for very small regional businesses who are hoping to

reboot their economic activity over the coming weeks and months.

There has already been a very significant increase in both the value of loans approved and the number of loans approved as this scheme has seen unprecedented levels of interest. As of July 10th, loans of €17.1 million have been approved since the commencement of the Scheme in March, compared to a total loan value approved in 2019 of €6 million. The number of loans approved has also shown a very significant increase with 629 loans approved since the commencement of the scheme compared to 452 loans approved in total in 2019.

Due to this unprecedented demand, lending through this scheme has currently been paused as legislation is required to increase the funding of MFI which is currently at capacity. This legislation passed through the Houses of the Oireachtas on the 8th and 9th of July and signed by the President on the 10th July last. Microfinance Ireland and officials from my Department will work together to reopen this Loan Fund as soon as possible.

Industrial Development

94. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the extent to which efforts continue to be made to invest in modern industry throughout the island of Ireland with a view to ensuring the maximum positive impact on international markets for products originating throughout the island ; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16010/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department through its agencies, Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland, is working with manufacturing and internationally traded services companies across Ireland to build scale, innovate and expand reach - key attributes required to be resilient to economic shocks such as Brexit and COVID-19.

At the start of 2020 as the Enterprise Ireland entered the final year of its strategy, client companies were performing strongly and were preparing for the challenges and opportunities presented by Brexit. The agency had delivered a range of new supports to mitigate market shocks associated with Brexit and a contingency plan was in place for activation if required.

In 2019, Enterprise Ireland supported 2,000 Brexit exposed companies and administered €125 million in supports to companies over a 2-year period. These preparations will stand to Irish enterprise as they seek to stabilise their businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic period and then position their companies to recover and grow once markets re-open.

To assist businesses to address the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, my Department with Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland and the Local Enterprise Offices has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports addressing stabilisation of business and access to finance to implement a business sustainment plan. In addition to this Enterprise Ireland remains committed to supporting companies build scale, innovate and expand reach. For example:

- Enterprise Ireland continues to engage with clients on a one-to-one basis to establish company need and will tailor a support package utilising the full suite of supports offered by the agency to address this need.

- The agency's global network of 40 offices continues to support this activity via providing market intelligence to inform companies' internationalisation strategies.

- Enterprise Ireland's client management development programmes, including the delivery

of mentoring services to companies, are now being delivered online to companies to support leadership and strategy development in client companies.

- Enterprise Ireland is delivering trade events between Irish companies and overseas buyers online. These are key events for winning business overseas.

- Funding to support regions build increased enterprise capability continues to be delivered. In June, €17 million was awarded under the Border Enterprise Development Fund by the agency to 11 projects in the region.

- In July an 'All Sectors' and 'Women Entrepreneurs' Competitive Start Fund was opened. The purpose of this fund is to accelerate the growth of start-up companies that have the capacity to succeed in global markets.

- Enterprise Ireland continues to provide equity investment of up to €800,000 on a co-funded basis, to innovation-led high potential start-ups that are developing and commercialising new or substantially improved technologies, products or services.

- Enterprise Ireland is currently engaged in the second call of its Seed and Venture Capital Scheme (2019-2024), targeting funds investing into companies emerging from the third-level research organisations (Spin Outs).

The impact of COVID-19 on Enterprise Ireland clients is unprecedented. How and when the economies of domestic and international markets recover remains unclear. In addition, challenges such as Brexit and changes to the global trading outlook will challenge Irish enterprise in the months ahead.

I can assure the Deputy that my Department and its agencies will monitor the needs of sectors and companies as the situation evolves and provide new supports to meet changing company needs, as required. Indigenous Irish companies are the backbone of the economy and the agency is committed to helping these companies sustain their businesses.

Question No. 95 answered with Question No. 92.

Industrial Development

96. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the degree to which he continues to support and drive the creation of new enterprises in the indigenous sector nationally with particular reference on the need to encourage the generation of employment throughout the regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16012/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department is committed to creating the environment which supports the creation of new enterprises throughout the country and thereby generating employment in every region.

The Programme for Government commits to the delivery of a National SME Growth Plan that will map out an ambitious long-term strategic blueprint beyond COVID-19. In that regard, I will soon be announcing the membership of an SME Growth Taskforce, which will have the capacity and expertise to progress work on thematic areas arising from recommendations by the OECD and to respond to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 Pandemic. This will cover themes including as entrepreneurship, productivity, digitalisation, competitiveness, internationalisation, clustering and networks. The Growth Plan will align with and build on existing

national SME policy initiatives. It will also be informed by the European Commission's very recent SME Strategy for a Sustainable and Digital Europe.

At programmatic level, my Department officials and our agencies are continually working towards driving the creation of new enterprises in the indigenous sector. Last week, for example, Enterprise Ireland launched a €2m Competitive Start Fund open to applicants for two competitions in the 'All Sectors' and 'Women Entrepreneurs' category. Each of the two €1,000,000 funds will provide up to €50,000 in equity funding to successful projects and may deliver the boost needed to scale up and bring their business to the next level.

These competitive funds are part of Enterprise Ireland's strategy for increasing the number of diverse High Potential Start-Up companies (HPSUs) that have the qualities to achieve key commercial and technical milestones, including evaluating overseas market opportunities, building prototypes, developing market entry plans and securing third party investment.

In addition, the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) provide advice, information and support to businesses in starting up or growing their business. With 31 dedicated teams across the Local Authority network in Ireland, the LEOs offer a wide range of experience, skills and services. The full range of LEO advisory supports continue to be available throughout the regions 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.

My Department has developed a range of proposals which I have brought to the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment for consideration. These proposals, along with others from Ministerial colleagues, will be developed and adjusted further for the Government's consideration of an ambitious stimulus package which will be announced soon.

Importantly, the July Initiative will aim to strategically position our economy and firms to meet future challenges.

I look forward to announcing the details shortly.

Foreign Direct Investment

97. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the degree to which he remains confident that Ireland continues to have the ability to attract foreign direct investment at a level required meet the economic needs of the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16125/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): COVID-19 has presented undeniable challenges to our ongoing efforts to sustain and grow foreign direct investment (FDI) in Ireland. The introduction of travel restrictions around the world is already, for example, disrupting the typical way in which the IDA engages with investors, resulting in fewer numbers of site visits and client meetings. The pandemic has also impacted investor confidence and has likely caused some investment decisions to be delayed or postponed.

Notwithstanding these challenges, which are also faced by our competitor countries, IDA Ireland's results for the first six months of this year have demonstrated the resilience of our FDI base. The Agency has secured over 130 investments to date in 2020, which have the potential to create almost 10,000 jobs. Almost half of these new projects were secured for locations outside Dublin, with 53 investments from companies investing in Ireland for the first time.

I believe that these 2020 investments reflect our continuing attractiveness to overseas firms. Overseas companies continue, the evidence would suggest, to value our FDI strengths. These include our talented and flexible work-force, a track record as a successful home to global businesses and a hard-won reputation as a pro-enterprise jurisdiction. Our continued commitment to the European Union, the single market and Eurozone, as well as to free trade and multilateralism, are other key selling points that help us convince multinational companies to establish operations and create jobs here.

At the same time, we do recognise that the global competition for FDI is intensifying and we are under no illusions that the time ahead will prove more challenging. We will have to fight, harder than ever before, for new investment projects and the jobs that go with them. I look forward, as Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, to taking on that challenge. This will include working with the IDA on the formulation of a new strategy that will guide the Agency's work in the time ahead.

Departmental Schemes

98. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the range of supports that will be put in place to support remote working; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16126/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As our country approaches a new normal, remote work is more important than ever. If implemented correctly, it can stimulate regional growth, support the transition to a greener economy, reduce business costs and improve employees' work-life balance.

However, for this to be possible, the necessary supports must be in place for business and employees to reap its benefits. This is reflected in research undertaken by my Department on Remote Work in Ireland in December 2019. This report outlined the prevalence and types of remote working in Ireland. It also identified the influencing factors for both employers and employees.

A key outcome identified in the Remote Work in Ireland report was the need for official guidance for employers and employees on a variety of different topics, such as equality, health and safety, employment conditions and the right to disconnect, data protection and training. My Department is now working to deliver this guidance with a dedicated Interdepartmental Group comprising of all relevant Departments and Agencies.

While this work is under way, my Department has a webpage which allows employers and employees to easily navigate the existing guidance on remote working. This webpage is a central access point for all of the Government guidance currently available on remote working.

Amid the COVID19 pandemic, many of us have had to adjust to working remotely with minimal preparation. To gain insights from employers and employees on their key areas of concern, my Department has launched a public consultation on remote working guidance. The submissions will allow us to identify areas where further guidance can be provided and will also shape future remote working policy. I encourage all interested parties to take part in this consultation, the full details of which can be found on my Department's website.

Following the results of this consultation, my Department will use the insights and feedback arising from the submissions to further refine the current remote working guidance. This work will be completed before the end of 2020.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

99. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the measures being put in place to help business move online during the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16127/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Trading Online Voucher Scheme (TOV) is a scheme which forms an integral part of the National Digital Strategy. In that context, my colleague, Minister Eamonn Ryan, Minister for Communications has responsibility for policy matters related to the scheme including the eligibility criteria and funding.

Nevertheless, in recognition of the increased demand for the scheme as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, my Department has recently contributed €7 million towards the Scheme to ensure that the scheme is adequately capitalised to meet the surge in demand from eligible applicant companies.

The TOV scheme assists small business owners to move to an online trading platform where they could potentially increase domestic sales and their export capability. The Scheme offers skills training, mentoring and financial support of up to €2,500 to help small and micro-businesses to develop their ecommerce capability.

In recognition of the increased demand for the scheme and as a further assistance to micro-enterprises, the scope of the TOVs scheme was expanded to offer financial assistance of up to €2,500 with a reduced co-funding contribution from businesses from 90% to 10%. The Scheme also contains a training and advice module for potential applicants.

On the 8th of June the Government announced additional funding of €14.2m for the Scheme bringing the total funding allocation in 2020 to €19.8m. This additional funding allowed LEOs to meet current demands for the Scheme. In addition, new flexibilities to the Scheme were introduced in April including allowing businesses to apply for a second voucher of up to €2,500 where they have successfully utilised their first one. To date over 7,000 applications have been received for the vouchers.

For enterprises with over 10 employees, Enterprise Ireland administers the COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme. The objective of the scheme is to support companies in the indigenous retail sector which have started an online journey which will have the most immediate impact enabling them to respond to both the domestic and international consumer demand with a competitive online offer.

On 2nd July, I announced the successful applicants approved for funding through the COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme. 183 retailers have been approved for €6.5 million in funding as part of the scheme, almost three quarters of the successful applicants are located outside Dublin with 130 retailers from the regions approved for funding.

The value of the scheme, which received 373 applications, was increased from €2 million to €6.5 million due to the high level of demand amongst retailers and the high quality of the proposals received. The Scheme helps Irish-owned retailers to strategically enhance their online sales capabilities, so they can be more competitive, sustain jobs and subsequently scale their businesses in international markets.

Under this COVID-19 competitive call, the successful applicants will receive funding ranging from €16,000 to €40,000 to strengthen their online offering. The average grant value is €35,500. Enterprise Ireland will be opening a 2nd Call under the COVID-19 Online Retail

Scheme in the coming weeks.

Enterprise Support Services

100. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the specific measures being considered to protect businesses facing into the Covid-19 recovery, which will affect businesses long after 1 January 2021, and a potential no-trade deal Brexit simultaneously; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16128/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Government has already introduced a €12bn package of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, the pandemic unemployment payment for the self-employed, grants, low-cost loans, repayable advances, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs.

As Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment I am leading on the development of an ambitious range of proposals for the July stimulus to further assist businesses to open and to sustain employment. These proposals, along with others from Ministerial colleagues, will be developed and adjusted further for the Government's consideration, which will be announced soon.

The range of supports available from my Department and across Government 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 the weeks and months ahead.

There are some welcome signs of improvement in business activity and the economy. However, sectors that employ a lot of people, such as tourism and hospitality, arts and entertainment and other services that rely on social interaction, remain in serious difficulty and their recovery prospects are highly uncertain. While we can't keep every firm and job alive, I believe our emphasis should still be to preserve these insofar as we can.

The July stimulus package to be announced shortly, will be radical, of scale and far-reaching. In considering the analyses, I see five areas in which we should focus on in helping our enterprises in the future.

1. Income supports for workers
2. Direct grants for businesses
3. Cheaper finance
4. New opportunities for future jobs
5. Support for the hardest hit sectors

The July Stimulus is aimed at helping firms meet the fixed, non-wage costs incurred during lockdown and in re-opening. Our current Restart Grant is a significant help but it could be improved to widen and deepen the impact for businesses that are reopening and taking back employees. That is why we are examining all dimensions of the Restart Grant as set out in the Programme for Government.

In improving access to finance, there is a need to not only guarantee credit but do so in a way which does not add costs to businesses unduly. As well as this, and looking to the long-term, the

important area of seed and venture capital needs strengthening.

While I have emphasised the importance of preserving existing firms and jobs, the July package should also have an eye to exploiting emerging opportunities and attract high value projects with significant economic benefits. Importantly, the July Initiative must position our economy and firms to meet future challenges. In the near-term, this includes helping companies further in overcoming the challenges of Brexit, but we also need to include measures that build enterprise resilience and help them transition to a low carbon future.

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.

Enterprise Ireland is also working with client companies to support the stabilisation of their business such as the Lean Business Continuity Support and the Business Financial Planning Grant so that they can undertake a developmental programme focused on recovery and growth.

In addition to the immediate COVID-19 response, Enterprise Ireland continues to strongly focus on supporting companies to invest in innovation, competitiveness and market diversification. This will be vital for recovery from the impact of COVID-19 and to meet the challenges and opportunities presented by Brexit.

The Regional Enterprise Development Fund (REDF), which is administered by Enterprise Ireland on behalf of my Department, was introduced to support the development and implementation of collaborative and innovative projects that can sustain and add to employment at county, regional and national level. The REDF has been an effective instrument of policy particularly as a complement to the Regional Enterprise Plans where it has served as an enabler for projects emerging from that regional collaborative process.

My Department's Border Enterprise Development Fund (BEDF), which is administered by Enterprise Ireland, was launched earlier this year and will provide support for collaborative, enterprise capability building projects, to advance entrepreneurship, productivity and innovation in the Border Region. The aim of the fund is to improve the international competitiveness of enterprise in the Border Region in the context of Brexit and other market challenges, which now also include COVID-19.

I can assure the Deputy that I will continue to work with my colleagues across Government and with all stakeholders, to examine all such appropriate business supports to assist all businesses impacted by COVID-19 and a possible no deal Brexit.

Brexit Supports

101. Deputy Neale Richmond asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the measures that will be put in place to protect vulnerable industries, particularly the agrifoods industry, post Brexit in view of the fact no trade deal will be better than the UK and Ireland both trading within the EU single market (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16129/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Brexit, in whatever shape it finally takes, will have a significant impact on the Irish economy and fundamentally change the trading environment for businesses trading with the UK.

My Department undertook a 2018 report entitled “Strategic Implications for Ireland arising from changing EU-UK trading relations” which examined the implications of Brexit for the Irish economy and trade.

While tariffs often spring to mind as a significant cost factor, it is in fact the cost of non-tariff barriers due to regulatory divergence that will have a greater impact on businesses trading with the UK.

In January this year, my Department published a further study on Brexit impacts based on the Withdrawal Agreement and the Revised Political Declaration (RPD) agreed between the EU and the UK. The findings suggest a reduction in Irish GDP of between 3.2% and 3.9% by 2030 compared with a baseline where the UK remains a member of the EU. This compares with a negative impact of 7% in the no deal (WTO basis) modelled in the 2018 study.

Of course, both Brexit studies predated COVID-19 which has had a severe impact on Irish GDP with recent forecasts for negative GDP growth in 2020 of around 10%.

Government has taken extensive action to mitigate the worst effects of Brexit and in each of the last three budgets provision was made to assist businesses to prepare for Brexit. This includes a wide variety of soft and harder enterprise and financial interventions delivered mainly through the enterprise agencies. At entry level, training, mentoring and consultancy advice has been provided leading to financial assistance by means of vouchers, grants, short term liquidity loans and longer-term loans to assist businesses restructure and diversify into new markets outside the UK.

Customs is another area that we have been actively working on putting in place training programmes as well as the Clear Customs Initiative designed to build sufficient capacity to deal with the new checks, controls and documentation that businesses will need post Brexit.

Furthermore, earlier this year my Department brought forward a €28 million economic stimulus package for the border region since border counties are heavily exposed to Brexit.

My Department, through the regulatory agencies under my remit, also has ongoing engagement in important regulatory areas such as product certification and standardisation, market surveillance and on consumer and competition issues.

Budget 2020 recognised the potentially disastrous effects of a No Deal Brexit. While we hope the ongoing discussions will be successful, the possibility of no trade deal cannot be ruled out. Budget 2020 made provision for a Contingency Fund to be made available in the event of a No Deal Brexit to help enterprises and sectors most affected. This contingency may well be required in the event that no deal is possible between the EU and the UK and further consideration will need to be given to this in the remaining months of this year.

While Brexit presents an economy wide challenge, several exporting sectors are highly exposed to Brexit, including the Food & Drinks sector. In 2019, approximately 200 Food & Drinks client companies reported exports into the UK. Of this, approximately 50% are highly exposed to Brexit. Enterprise Ireland is working intensively with this group to ensure that sustainability and growth plans are in place as we approach end of the transition period on 31st December.

Over the past four years, Enterprise Ireland has rolled out a range of supports to help companies to prepare for Brexit including the Brexit Scorecard, Be Prepared Grant, Advisory Clinics, Online Customs Training, and Act On Consultancy. These supports have been effective in ensuring our Food & Drinks clients have access to all the available information and expertise in order to develop robust Brexit plans.

14 July 2020

The momentous structural shift that Brexit represents will bring additional challenges for our Food and Drink companies around competitiveness, innovation and market diversification.

Cost competitiveness is key and Irish companies will face increased competition not only in the UK market but also in the domestic market.

Closely related to staying competitive is the real need for companies to invest more in innovation which is a critical component of competitiveness and is also an enabler for companies to diversify into new products and in turn, new markets.

Working closely with Bord Bia, Enterprise Ireland continues to support all Food & Drinks client companies to innovate, compete and diversify their exports in order to support companies to navigate the challenges and opportunities posed by Brexit. Enterprise Ireland's Brexit specific supports will continue to be utilised alongside supports focused on innovation and competitiveness such as their Agile Innovation Fund, R&D Fund, Lean Transform Fund and Operational Excellence grants to position companies to diversify their product offering and to reach new markets.

It is intended also that the LEOs will continue to offer Brexit measures focused on winning export customers and improving competitiveness through existing measures such as the Technical Assistance for Micro Exporter Grants, the Lean4Micro and Productivity Challenges initiatives.

The July Stimulus Package will also aid our economy to recovery from the shock of the pandemic and restore confidence and prosperity. I have already said that the Package will be radical, far-reaching aimed at setting our economy on the right course for the foreseeable future.

I am confident that the actions we take now, followed by those outlined in the national recovery plan and Budget 2021 in October, will put our economy on the right track to deal with Brexit regardless of the nature of the future trading relationship between the EU and the UK.

Company Law

102. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation the measures that will be put in place to reform company law in view of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16130/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I brought proposals to Cabinet yesterday, which were approved by Government, for the priority drafting of proposed amendments to the Companies Act 2014 to take account of the continuing impact of Covid-19 on our economy.

The proposed amendments to the Companies Act follow extensive engagement by my Department with the Company Law Review Group (CLRG) and are designed to help companies mitigate the impact Covid-19 continues to have on the normal operation of business while maintaining the appropriate safeguards for the protection of employees and creditors.

On 25 June, the CLRG recommended a number of amendments to address areas of concern in respect of operational matters in relation to compliance under the Act such as the requirement to hold an Annual General Meeting (AGM), and protective measures designed to pre-empt certain impacts the crisis may have on a company's solvency with a view to protecting viable businesses, retaining employment and supporting economic recovery post-crisis. The CLRG recommended that amendments be temporary in nature and operational until 31 December

2020, with the potential for extension.

The proposed amendments to the Companies Act that I am bringing forward on this basis are to:

- Provide for virtual general and creditors' meetings. This is to allow companies to comply with their obligations under the Companies Act while also ensuring they act in accordance with the latest Government health advice.

- Allow companies to postpone an AGM until 31 December 2020.

- Allow documents which are required to be executed under seal to be signed in separate counterparts. This is to address the situation where a company seal and its directors and secretary are in separate locations due to remote working. It is a small amendment but one with a practical impact that will reduce the administrative burden on companies;

- Increase the amount at which a creditor can issue a statutory demand from €10,000 for a single creditor and €20,000 in the aggregate to €50,000. This amendment is intended to support viable businesses and ensure they are not wound up by the Court for relatively low levels of debt.

- Extend the examinership process to a total of 150 days. The amendment seeks to provide businesses in examinership with additional breathing space as they attempt to restructure and trade through the pandemic. This extension is subject to court approval and in making its determination the court will consider the impact of Covid-19 and the impact any extension will have to the survival of the company and preservation of employment.

- Codify a directors' duty to creditors as a company approaches insolvency. This amendment is based on a recommendation of the Company Law Review Group in its 2017 Report on the Protection of Employees and Unsecured Creditors. It would put the duty owed to creditors on a statutory footing, in line with other fiduciary duties.

These amendments are considered necessary in the immediate term to address the instant impacts of the crisis.

The General Scheme of a Bill to provide for these proposed amendments to the Companies Act 2014 is being published on my Department's website today.

As the country moves forward from the immediate impacts of the Covid-19 crisis, it will also be essential that we consider stabilisation measures required in the medium term. In this regard, I have requested the Company Law Review Group examine as a priority the issue of corporate rescue for SMEs and micro-enterprise, given the vital part that such businesses will play in our country's economic recovery.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

103. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation if the business restart grant will be reviewed; if further grant supports for SMEs will be considered in view of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16131/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As stated in the Programme for Government, we will bring forward a Jobs Stimulus this month to boost our economy and help restore employment. Helping our SMEs is central to this, given their pivotal role in the economy and employment. This July Stimulus will extend,

enhance and add to the existing measures totalling €12 billion in supports for COVID-19 impacted businesses already announced.

The Restart Grant was launched on 22 May 2020 and is a critically important tool to support small businesses to reopen their doors and get back on their feet. Grant payments available range from a minimum of €2,000 up to €10,000 available. The scheme was devised in recognition of the fact that micro and small businesses were and are particularly vulnerable to the economic effects of COVID-19.

Using funding allocated by my Department to Enterprise Ireland for the Scheme, the Local Authorities are the granting authority in each of their respective areas. The Local Authorities make grant payments to the bank account of qualifying businesses, in accordance with the scheme.

As of 10 July 2020, 40,506 businesses have applied for €141.7m in grants. A total sum of €94,795,136 in grants has been disbursed to businesses by local authorities to date, in respect of 23,326 applications.

A further sum of €15,044,550 is due to be paid in respect of applications which have recently been approved.

The Restart Grant is, however, just one part of a wider assistance package for business and for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, the pandemic unemployment payment for the self-employed, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs. Within the funding available so far, the priority has been to assist those who have suffered most, including closure of the business, but whom will still have incurred ongoing costs.

Although the Restart grant scheme has been broadly welcomed by those businesses which have benefitted, I am examining how it can be improved to widen and deepen the impact for businesses that are reopening and taking back employees. My officials are examining all dimensions of the Restart Grant as set out in the Programme for Government.

Electric Vehicles

104. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the mechanisms in place for persons residing in private apartment complexes to install electric car chargers at their own cost in their parking spaces or to encourage management companies to allow residents to do so as in the case of residents in a location (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14793/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Home charging accounts for around 80% of electric vehicle (EV) charging in Ireland and it is best practice, internationally, to promote home charging as the most common and cheapest form of charging. Government policy is to promote home charging and to maintain the current high level of home charging.

The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) administers an EV Home Charger Grant of up to €600 towards the purchase and installation of an EV home charger unit for those with access to an off-street parking space which can be connected to their domestic supply.

The SEAI also administers an EV Public Charge Point Grant to Local Authorities to install charge points on public streets or public car parks which provide overnight car parking for local

residents. A total of 75% of the capital costs is provided through the grant, up to a maximum of €5,000 per charge point.

The Climate Action Plan set out a number of steps necessary to develop the EV charging network and work is being progressed to expand the EV Home Charger Grant to include shared parking (i.e. in apartment blocks). However, there is a number of complex planning and legal issues to address before it will be possible to expand this grant. My Department and the SEAI are working to address the issues involved.

Crime Prevention

105. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if he has considered measures to reduce thefts of catalytic converters such as requiring proof of vehicle ownership before catalytic converters can be sold on the market. [14832/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Issues concerning the theft and handling of stolen property are matters for the Minister for Justice and Equality. Under the Criminal Justice (Theft and Fraud Offences) Act 2001, maximum sentences of 10 years are provided for in the case of offences of theft and handling of stolen property; while maximum sentences of 5 years are provided for the offence of possession of stolen property.

While regulation of the scrap metal industry including second hand car parts is not a matter within the remit of my Department, the regulation of waste activities is, of course, relevant to the industry. In order to improve traceability of waste received and to counter the trade in stolen metal, an amendment to the Waste Management (Facility Permit and Registration) Regulations 2007 was introduced to require the following at all permitted facilities receiving/purchasing waste:

- the production of proof of identity and current address of the person supplying the material,
- records to be kept of the registration number and waste collection permit number of the delivery vehicle,
- that records be kept describing the materials, time and date of sale, weight and amount paid, and
- a signed statement by the person supplying the material that they are the lawful owner of the material.

Under the National Waste Enforcement Priorities 2020, local authorities have been instructed to undertake appropriate inspections to ensure compliance by waste facility operators with these enhanced traceability requirements. In addition officials from my Department continue to be actively involved in the Metal Theft Forum, which is a collaborative working group between State stakeholders and industry representatives to improve information sharing around the issue of metal theft.

In line with the commitment set out in the Programme for Government - Our Shared Future - I will shortly be publishing an ambitious Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy which will contain further actions to strengthen waste enforcement at national, regional and local levels.

Ministerial Responsibilities

106. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the Minister that has responsibility for the environment. [14904/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Environmental functions constitute a significant proportion of my Department's area of responsibility, and include those in relation to climate action, waste and resource efficiency, sustainable development, and air quality, as well as the governance and oversight of the Environmental Protection Agency.

Other Government Departments also have responsibility for what could be broadly classified as "environmental functions". For example, the Department of Housing, Planning and Heritage will have responsibility for water quality, marine spatial planning and biodiversity issues.

The Programme for Government provides for the establishment of a Cabinet Committee on Environment and Climate Change which will consider all of Government environmental and biodiversity issues.

Ministerial Responsibilities

107. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the Minister that has responsibility for waste management. [15069/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, my role with regard to waste management is to provide a comprehensive legislative and waste policy framework through which the relevant environmental regulatory bodies, including local authorities and the Environmental Protection Agency, operate.

In this context I will soon be bringing forward an ambitious new waste policy which will include a range of measures to reform and strengthen how we manage our waste with a greater focus on prevention through product design and consumer choice.

Energy Efficiency

108. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the details of the national retrofit plan; if the pilot scheme that was cancelled in 2019 will be rerun; the details of future undertakings of the pilot scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15943/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set highly ambitious targets for the number and depth of residential retrofits to be completed by 2030. The targets are to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2/cost optimal equivalent and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next 10 years. Retrofitting has the ability to contribute to a number of important goals including - decarbonisation; warmer, more comfortable homes; and job creation and retention.

A cross-Departmental Retrofit Taskforce has been established to develop a new retrofit delivery model capable of achieving these targets. This process has been informed by experience

from existing schemes in Ireland such as the Deep Retrofit Pilot Scheme referred to by the Deputy, consultation with stakeholders and an analysis of relevant international experience. The model is designed to address barriers to energy efficiency investments in four key areas: customer proposition and demand generation, financing and affordability, supplier capacity, and delivery structure. The Climate Action Plan, as part of this process, commits to reviewing and redesigning the existing grant schemes to ensure alignment with Government climate objectives and value for money.

The Retrofit Taskforce report is to be published in Q3 2020 which will inform the future design or retrofit schemes to deliver the ambitious targets as set out in the program for government.

Trading Online Voucher Scheme

109. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if additional funding will be available to local authorities that have exhausted their trading online voucher allowances for 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16095/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Trading Online Voucher Scheme is managed by my Department and delivered nationwide in partnership with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, the Department of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht, Enterprise Ireland, the 31 Local Enterprise Offices and Údarás na Gaeltachta. The Scheme offers skills training, mentoring and a grant of up to €2,500 to help small and micro-businesses to develop their ecommerce capability.

The Scheme was launched nationally in mid-2014. By end 2019, some 6,400 small and micro businesses had completed, or were in the process of completing their trading online projects. In addition, 19,000 or so business owners-managers had benefitted from advice and peer-to-peer support through their participation in the information seminars delivered by the Local Enterprise Offices under the Scheme.

In response to Covid-19, funding for the Scheme in 2020 was increased from €2.3m to €19.8m, and new flexibilities were introduced including reducing the requirement for co-funding from 50% to 10% and allowing businesses to apply for a second voucher of up to €2,500 where they have successfully utilised their first one.

There has been continuing high demand for the Scheme and my Department in liaison with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and Enterprise Ireland is working with the LEO network to address that demand. Funding for the Scheme is kept under review.

National Broadband Plan

110. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if fibre broadband will be put in place for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14678/20]

129. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment when broadband will be available at a house (details supplied); the steps the owner can take to accelerate the process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15692/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon

Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 110 and 129 together.

The Questions refer 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).

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. The Government is committed to delivering high speed broadband to every home, farm, business and school in Ireland and my Department continues to engage with NBI to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of this rollout to establish the possibility of bringing forward premises which are currently scheduled in years 6 and 7 of the current plan to an earlier date. Further information on deployment activities associated with the rollout can be found on the NBI website <http://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 deployment under the National Broadband Plan (NBP). 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 connectivity is being provided to each of the sites by National Broadband Ireland (NBI). Subsequent to this, the sites, other than schools, are being Wi-Fi enabled by Vodafone under a contract with the Department of Rural and Community Development. This work also involves the local authorities and site owners determining the services that will be provided for end-users at each site. For the 75 schools that are also part of this project, enabling these schools with Wi-Fi is being led by the Department of Education subsequent to NBI providing the connectivity to the schools.

Bringing connectivity to remote rural locations is central to promoting regional development and BCPs represent an important delivery in the early stages of the National Broadband Plan.

National Broadband Plan

111. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the status of broadband for Muckloonmodderree, Cornamult and the Terryglass areas of County Tipperary; when the areas will receive fibre broadband through State intervention and the national broadband plan, NBP, in view of the fact the area was brought into the amber region following the 2019 NBP mapping consultation review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14717/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Question refers to areas 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.

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 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 complete or ongoing in target townlands across 14 counties, including Tipperary.

The Government is committed to delivering high speed broadband to every home, farm, business and school in Ireland and my Department continues to engage with NBI to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of this rollout to establish the possibility of bringing forward premises which are currently scheduled in years 6 and 7 of the current plan to an earlier date. Further information on deployment activities associated with the rollout can be found on the NBI website <http://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. I understand that a BCP location is planned near the areas referenced, at Aglish Community Hall, which will assist the local community to quickly get free public access to high speed broadband in advance of the main deployment under the National Broadband Plan (NBP). 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 connectivity is being provided to each of the sites by National Broadband Ireland (NBI). Subsequent to this, the sites, other than schools, are being Wi-Fi enabled by Vodafone under a contract with the Department of Rural and Community Development. This work also involves the local authorities and site owners determining the services that will be provided for end-users at each site.

For the 75 schools that are also part of this project, enabling these schools with Wi-Fi is being led by the Department of Education subsequent to NBI providing the connectivity to the schools.

Bringing connectivity to remote rural locations is central to promoting regional development and BCPs represent an important delivery in the early stages of the National Broadband Plan.

Ministerial Responsibilities

112. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if he will provide a copy of the departmental briefings received by him and each Minister of State in his Department upon taking up each individual role; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14798/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department provided a comprehensive briefing document to me on my appointment as Minister. It is my intention to publish the document as soon as possible.

14 July 2020

Local Authority Schemes

113. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if measures will be put in place to make scooter schemes available to local authorities (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14929/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Policy related to Electric Vehicles and electric transport options are kept under constant review as this is a rapidly developing sector and market, characterized by significant innovation.

My Department will continue to review its policies in this area to ensure that supports are effectively and efficiently targeted over 2020 and 2021.

Postal Services

114. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if consideration will be given to redrawing the eircode boundaries to keep them separated by county, in view of the fact parts of east County Clare are grouped with County Limerick, which can prove challenging when persons need to give their eircodes to access services. [14936/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Capita Business Support Services Ireland, trading as Eircode, was awarded a 10 year contract in December 2013 to develop, implement, maintain and promote the use of the National Postcode System “Eircode”.

All postal addresses, geographical addresses and geo-locations are provided to Eircode from authoritative sources, namely An Post and Ordnance Survey Ireland respectively through their subsidiary company An Post GeoDirectory.

Eircode does not change existing addresses and the Eircode can be added to the address normally used for the property. This address can be the most commonly used address, postal address or/and the geographical address. The free to use online Eircode Finder (<https://www.eircode.ie/>) provides both the geographical and postal addresses for properties in the state.

The postcode system was designed to align with the postal network and therefore, the Eircode boundaries are aligned with the boundaries used by An Post for postal delivery.

Departmental Functions

115. **Deputy Darren O’Rourke** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the details of the restructuring of his Department; the agencies and offices that now fall under his remit; the offices and agencies that have been removed from his remit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14958/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Until such time as the transfer of functions order is finalised I retain all the functions currently residing with the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

The broadcasting and online safety functions of the Department are to transfer to the current Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in due course and when that is finalised

responsibility for specific Bodies - RTE, TG4 and the BAI - will transfer to that Department.

The Bodies currently under the remit of the Department are outlined in the table below.

Name of Body	Status
An Post Bord na Móna (BnaM) EirGrid Electricity Supply Board (ESB) Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTE) TG4	Commercial State Bodies (6)
Digital Hub Development Agency (DHDA) Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission (Loughs Agency) Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) Irish National Petroleum Corporation (INPC) Mining Board National Oil Reserves Agency (NORA) Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI)	Non Commercial State Bodies (8)
Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg)	Regulators (3)

Departmental Budgets

116. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the estimated budget allocation for his reconfigured Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14959/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department is currently preparing an Order to transfer responsibility for media and broadcasting to the newly constituted Department of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sports and the Gaeltacht. My Department are also working to finalise the budget allocation for my Department, which will be published in Revised Estimates later this year.

Energy Efficiency

117. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the status of applications for the SEAI renewable heat deep retrofit scheme; the number of approved applications from January to June 2020; the cost of approved applications; the budget allocated to the SEAI for the scheme; the processing time for applications to the scheme; when letters of offer will issue on such applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14986/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Support Scheme for Renewable Heat was developed to financially support the adoption of renewable heating systems by commercial, industrial, agricultural, district heating and other non-domestic heat users.

The Scheme, which is operated by the SEAI, provides an operational support for biomass boilers and anaerobic digestion heating systems. Eligible renewable energy technologies are supported through a multi-annual payment, for a period of up to 15 years, on the basis of prescribed tariffs. The National Development Plan sets out an allocation of €300 million for the roll-out of the scheme for the period up to 2027. The scheme has a maximum annual budget currently set at €5 million.

In the period from January to June 2020, 17 applications were approved by the SEAI which have a combined maximum annual cost of €471,247. Processing time for applications to the scheme varies depending on the complexity of the project, but is typically 20 weeks. It is envisaged that processing times will reduce as the scheme develops. Letters of Offer are only issued

to a project following evaluation and approval of the project by the SEAI. Typically a batch of projects will be approved and Letters of Offer issued on a monthly basis. Where an applicant has a specific query on an application, this should be addressed to SEAI.

Renewable Energy Generation

118. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment his plans to ensure that funds from the community benefit funds of €2 per MWh on renewable energy schemes will be administered by an independent body such as the municipal authority or the local LAG for the LEADER scheme; the consultation he plans to have to ensure these funds are directed at the communities locally that host renewable energy schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15179/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Under the terms and conditions of the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme all projects supported by the scheme must establish a Community Benefit Fund. This is to ensure that the local community receives actual direct benefits from the renewable project located in their locality. The Department has already committed to the publication of a Good Practice Principles Handbook by July 2021. This will lay out a range of principles, including guidance on how the new funds will be managed and administered and the need to ensure community participation in fund decision-making via the establishment of a local committee, which should encourage successful local dispersal of funds.

There is already a commitment in place to set up a national register of the benefit funds and their outputs and the Department is committed to standards of governance, accountability and reporting in accordance with international best practice. The Department and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland are now developing a draft of this handbook which will be made available for public consultation well in advance of its final publication.

Telecommunications Services

119. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if there is grant aid available to a person (details supplied) who needs a mobile booster to receive mobile reception and broadband; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15216/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Providing telecommunication services, including mobile phone and broadband services, is a matter for the relevant service providers operating in a fully liberalised market regulated by the Commission for Communication Regulation (ComReg), as independent Regulator.

Since its inception in July 2016, the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce has been a driving force for improving access to telecommunications services throughout Ireland and it will continue its work in the context of its inclusion in the Programme for Government. To date the Taskforce has addressed over 70 targeted actions designed to alleviate connectivity barriers, and continues to focus on issues that are negatively impacting upon the rollout of essential telecommunications infrastructure, particularly in rural areas.

One such measure introduced by the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce has been the development by ComReg of a licensing scheme to enable households and businesses to use mobile phone repeaters to boost signals into their premises for immediate coverage improvement.

ComReg has set technical conditions that mobile phone repeaters must comply with to be permitted. The technical conditions aim to provide consumers with better indoor coverage while protecting Mobile Network Operators from unwanted interference.

The price of repeaters can vary depending on the number of services to be covered e.g. call & texts only, data only or calls, texts and data. ComReg advises consumers to consider their needs before making a purchase. A list of manufacturers and installers of these devices is available on the ComReg website, www.comreg.ie.

However, there is no grant scheme in operation to assist with the purchase of this equipment.

Television Licence Fee

120. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the process by which the licence fee is paid to RTÉ having been collected by An Post; if payment is made on a regular basis such as quarterly or yearly; the way in which the payments were made during 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15305/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Television licence fee receipts are paid to my Department by An Post on the 15th and 30th of each month. In addition monthly payments are made on the 15th of the month by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to my Department for the free TV licences Scheme. My Department subsequently makes payments to RTÉ twice monthly less An Post's fees for collection services and 7% of net receipts which is paid to the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland's (BAI) Broadcasting Fund.

The total licence fee payment to RTÉ was €188.57m in 2018 and €196.55m in 2019. Payments to end June 2020 amount to €89.32m. RTÉ publishes details of all TV licence receipts in their annual reports which can be found at <https://about.rte.ie/reports-and-policies/annual-reports/>.

Renewable Energy Generation

121. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if the new renewable electricity support scheme requires the wind farm developer to submit a bid in the upcoming RESS auction in order to be connected to the grid; and if the developer is unsuccessful, when the next RESS auction will take place. [15386/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS) is an auction-based scheme which invites renewable electricity projects to compete for a guaranteed price for the electricity they generate. The first of these renewable electricity auctions (RESS-1) will take place on the 21 July. There will be a series of auctions up to 2030 to deliver on Ireland's renewable electricity targets.

RESS-1 is open to renewable generator projects who are in receipt of a grid connection offer or are eligible to receive one under the Enduring Connection Policy process. Other eligibility criteria include planning permission and landowner agreements.

Renewable generators may also enter the market via Corporate or Merchant Power Purchase Agreements (CPPAs) i.e. unsubsidised supply contracts with private entities or utilities.

The Climate Action Plan sets out a target of 15% of all renewable electricity from CPPAs by 2030. CPPAs have potential to provide a route to market for renewable project developers, boosting Ireland's renewable energy capacity. The Plan includes a suite of actions to develop effective policy tools that can kick start corporate PPAs in Ireland and deliver on our RES-E targets at no extra cost to the public.

Renewable generators may apply for and receive grid connections without participating in RESS.

Energy Efficiency

122. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the new measures he is planning for those who do not have sufficient financial resources, particularly those with a disability, to support them in the retrofit in view of the target to retrofit 500,000 houses; and if there are existing supports for persons on a disability outside the mainstream grants. [15469/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set highly ambitious targets for the number and depth of residential retrofits to be completed by 2030. The targets are to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2/cost optimal equivalent and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next 10 years. Retrofitting has the ability to contribute to a number of important goals including - decarbonisation; warmer, more comfortable homes; and job creation and retention.

A cross-Departmental Retrofit Taskforce has been established to develop a new retrofit delivery model capable of achieving these targets. This process has been informed by consultation with stakeholders and an analysis of relevant national and international experience. The model is designed to address barriers to energy efficiency investments in four key areas: customer proposition and demand generation, financing and affordability, supplier capacity, and delivery structure. Development of the plan will be underpinned by principles including quality and fairness. The Taskforce is also working to determine the estimated cost of achieving the retrofit targets. The Retrofit Taskforce report is to be published in Q3 2020.

The Climate Action Plan also commits to reviewing ways to better target current energy poverty schemes, such as the Warmer Homes Scheme, to those most in need. Recommendations in relation to the implementation of changes to the scheme will be finalised shortly.

At €146 million, the 2020 budget allocation for energy efficiency in homes and businesses is the highest ever. This represents a €29 million increase over the 2019 budget. The allocation for schemes exclusively available to lower income households is approximately €60 million. These schemes are available to people in receipt of certain payments including the Domiciliary Care Allowance and the Carer's Allowance.

The Deputy may also wish to note that the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government funds the Housing Adaptation grant for Older People and People with a Disability. This grant is administered by Local Authorities.

Broadcasting Sector

123. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and

Environment the funding provided to RTÉ in each of the years, 2019, 2018 and 2017; the sum allocated to RTÉ in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15501/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department receives licence fee monies from An Post for direct sales and a contribution from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection in respect of free licences issued under the Household Benefits Scheme.

My Department pays An Post costs as collection agent, 7% of net receipts to the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) for the Broadcasting Fund and the balance to RTÉ. The total payments to RTÉ were €184.80m in 2017, €188.57m in 2018 and €196.55m in 2019. Total licence fee funding in 2020 has not yet been determined as the final amount is contingent on licence fee sales to the public to end 2020. Payments to date for 2020 (end June) amount to €89.32m. RTÉ publishes details of all TV licence receipts in their annual reports which can be found at <https://about.rte.ie/reports-and-policies/annual-reports/>.

Broadcasting Sector

124. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the allocation made in 2020 to RTÉ for independent productions commissioned by RTÉ; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15502/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Section 116 of the Broadcasting Act 2009 sets out the requirements for RTÉ to keep an independent programme account for the commissioning and making of independent television or sound broadcasting programmes. The statutory minimum spend set out in the Act is €40m, adjusted annually in line with the Consumer Price Index (CPI). In the most recent report sent to my Department for 2019, which was submitted in Q1 2020, RTÉ was required to pay €39.9 million into the account. The actual amount incurred on independent productions in 2019 by RTÉ was €40.07m, broken down as follows, €38.85m (Television) and €1.22m (Radio).

The independent programme account for 2020 will be submitted to my Department in Q1 of 2021 and will be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Broadcasting Sector

125. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the funding allocation made to media outlets other than RTÉ; and the funding each outlet received in 2019. [15506/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): In addition to RTE, my Department also provides exchequer funding to TG4 and 7% of net licence fee monies to the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) in respect of the Broadcasting Fund. The Broadcasting Fund supports the Sound and Vision Scheme for the production of programming on Irish culture, heritage and experience and the Archiving Scheme for the preservation of broadcast material.

TG4 was allocated funding of €34.233m in current expenditure and €2m capital expenditure in 2019. A total of €14.79m funding was allocated to the BAI Broadcasting Fund in 2019.

Broadcasting Sector

126. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the funding allocation made to the sound and vision fund in 2019; the expected funding for 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15507/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Under Section 156 of the Broadcasting Act 2009, my Department pays 7% of net TV Licence fee receipts to the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) for the administration of the Broadcasting Fund. The Fund supports the Sound and Vision and Archiving Schemes.

In 2019 the BAI received €14.79m and announced financial support for 241 radio and TV programmes under the Sound and Vision 3 Scheme. The beneficiaries were from the commercial, community and public service broadcasting sectors. €1.34m was allocated to five projects under the Archiving Scheme during 2019.

The total to be paid to the fund in 2020 is contingent on the level of licence fee receipts. The total paid to the BAI to June 2020 is €7.01m. The BAI publishes details of both Schemes and successful applicants on their website at www.bai.ie

Broadcasting Sector

127. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the funding allocation made to TG4 in each of the years 2017 to 2019; and the expected spend for 2020. [15511/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Up to 2019 TG4 was part funded from TV Licence receipts and exchequer funding. Since 2019 TG4 receives all its public funding from the exchequer. The breakdown of funding from 2017-2020 is provided in the table below; the 2018 capital figure includes an once off grant of €985,000 in respect of Bliain na Gaeilge.

		Current Expenditure (€m)	Capital Expenditure (€m)	Total(€m)
	Licence Fee Receipts	Exchequer Funding		
2017	4.245	28.545	1.450	34.240
2018	4.245	29.545	2.985	36.775
2019	-	34.233	2.000	36.233
2020 (REV)	-	34.233	3.000	37.233

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

128. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the percentage emissions reduction target set for each of the next five years; the plans in place to achieve these reductions; the estimated cost of achieving same; the modelling used to underpin the assumptions on which the reductions are based; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15645/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The action we take in the coming years will be critical in order to address the climate crisis, which threatens our safe future on this planet.

The Programme for Government sets out our shared commitment to achieve an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030. This is in line with the goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. This target also aligns with the increased ambition proposed under the European Green Deal and is similar to the 7.6% per annum reduction called for in the UNEP Carbon Emissions Gap report.

As Minister for Climate Action, I will lead on delivering this ambition, which will more than halve our carbon emissions over the course of the decade. With the increased scale and depth of this ambition, new strategies will be needed to sustain a reduction trajectory that will increase over time. I will work with colleagues across government to develop a new Climate Action Plan before year end, with additional initiatives in every sector to bring about the significant change needed to transform our society. This work will build on recent policy developments and will be underpinned by a solid analytical foundation on the most cost-effective pathway to delivering our increased ambition.

While this will be challenging, requiring fundamental changes in how we live our lives, we will improve the health, welfare and security of our society, as well as realising enormous opportunities in a new, decarbonised economy. To this end, the government is committed to ensuring that the economic recovery is a green recovery delivered in a fair way that ensures no sector of society is left behind. The July Stimulus and the National Economic Plan will seek to front-load investment to this end.

Question No. 129 answered with Question No. 110.

Recycling Policy

130. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment his views on the recent report carried out by UL and NUIG, headed by a person (details supplied), which has found that as much as 31% of plastic exported from Ireland for recycling is not recycled; his views on whether such a practice could harm public confidence in recycling; his plans to decrease this figure to zero; his further views on whether Ireland cannot adopt an out of sight, out of mind mentality when it comes to the disposal of plastic waste; his further plans to improve downstream traceability to ensure plastic exported from Ireland for recycling is actually recycled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15776/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The legislative framework for the import and export of waste in the European Union is set out in Regulation (EC) No. 1013/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council. The purpose of the Regulation is to implement measures for the supervision and control of shipments of waste in order to ensure that the movement, recovery, or disposal of waste, is managed in an environmentally sound manner, for the protection of the environment and human health.

The objective of this system of control on waste shipments is to ensure that not only is waste moved to another country with that country's advance knowledge, but that wastes from the EU are not dumped in less developed countries. It should be noted that 83% of plastic packaging waste funded under Extended Producer Responsibility arrangements is recycled in Europe, predominantly in the UK, Germany, and Poland with 15% recycled in Ireland and the balance, 2%, outside Europe.

I am committed to tackling the problems associated with single use plastics and my Department is working to transpose and implement EU Directive 2019/904, commonly referred to as the Single Use Plastics Directive, at the earliest possible date. This Directive will enable the

prohibition of certain single use items being placed on the market including polystyrene food and beverage containers, plastic cutlery and plates, straws and balloon sticks. I am currently exploring what measures, including the possible introduction of levies, will best deliver on this ambition.

Waste management practices are evolving and changing in response to the Circular Economy Package and the EU Plastics Strategy and I will soon be bringing forward an ambitious new waste policy which will reflect and exceed the level of ambition in the waste and climate areas at EU level. This will help drive innovation to improve plastic recycling quality and standards and to increase domestic waste treatment capacity overall, thereby reducing our reliance and dependence on markets outside of the EU.

Energy Efficiency

131. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment if energy improvement grants awarded in 2020 will continue into 2021 (details supplied) under the new programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15933/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set highly ambitious targets for the number and depth of residential retrofits to be completed by 2030. The targets are to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2/cost optimal equivalent and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next 10 years. Retrofitting has the ability to contribute to a number of important goals including - decarbonisation; warmer, more comfortable homes; and job creation and retention.

The administration of energy efficiency schemes funded by my Department is a matter for the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). I have however asked for some enquiries to be made on this matter. Unfortunately the information provided in the Deputy's question did not identify definitively which scheme the applicant applied under. However, based on the information provided, SEAI have advised it would most likely be the Better Energy Communities Scheme as it operates a contract end date of 15 October.

SEAI are being as flexible as possible given the unusual circumstances we find ourselves in currently, with the goal of a full delivery of the 2020 programme and allocated budget. The team in SEAI are aware of a number of logistical difficulties with some products and are open to discuss options with project coordinators responsible for delivery of contracts.

The job of the project coordinators under the Communities scheme is to ensure delivery within the terms and conditions and they get a fee for this service. The project coordinators therefore have full responsibility for logistical arrangements. To date the Energy Agency through which the applicant applied has not indicated to SEAI that they have any difficulty with delivery of the project. SEAI have advised that the applicant should contact their project coordinator regarding this matter. Should they have an issue in this regard they should raise it with SEAI.

Bord na Móna

132. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment when funding will be provided to Bord na Móna for the enhanced peatland reha-

bilitation scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15973/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Bord na Móna announced, on 16 June, their intention to suspend peat harvesting activities for 2020 while its substitute consent application is under consideration by an Bord Pleanála, and to put in place an enhanced peatlands rehabilitation scheme as a key component of Bord na Móna's move away from peat.

The Government is committed to supporting Bord na Móna to deliver an extensive multi-annual programme of rehabilitation of the company's land bank. My Department and Bord na Móna are progressing the necessary measures, including funding, to facilitate the advanced rehabilitation of 33,000 hectares of Bord na Móna bog previously harvested for peat used in electricity generation, commencing this year. I expect this work to be completed shortly.

Public Inquiries

133. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment the number of tribunals, public investigations and commissions of investigations in process; the length of time each has been under way; when each will conclude; the cost to date of each; and the estimated cost of each at completion. [16141/20]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department has no tribunals, public investigations or commissions of investigation in process.

Road Projects

134. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if critical road infrastructure such as the proposed Adare bypass (details supplied) in County Limerick will not be abandoned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14719/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Climate, Energy, Communications, Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and securing exchequer funding in relation to the National Roads Programme.

Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 and in line with the current National Development Plan (NDP), the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. This is also subject to the Public Spending Code Guidelines and the necessary statutory approvals.

In this context, TII is best placed to advise you on the status of this project. Noting the above position, I have referred your question to TII for a direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

As set out in the Programme for Government, the Government will be carrying out a review of the National Development Plan later this year, taking account of the priorities of Government set out in the Programme. The Deputy may wish to address further questions he may have on the review of the NDP to my colleague the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

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135. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if consideration will be given to a proposal by a person (details supplied) to boost the tourism sector and ensure small local businesses survive the difficult economic situation due the Covid-19 crisis. [14732/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Programme for Government contains a commitment that the Government will publish a series of immediate actions to support the economy - the “July Stimulus”. In this context the Government will, among other things, consider further additional measures that may be needed to support the tourism and hospitality sector.

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 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 put in place a number of supports for the tourism and hospitality sector. Details of these are available on Fáilte Ireland’s website.

My predecessor also established the Tourism Recovery Taskforce on 20th May 2020 to prepare a Tourism Recovery Plan. This 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 Taskforce has submitted an initial report.

Road Projects

136. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the start date for the commencement of the construction of the J14 link road and Bracken Link Road, Sandyford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14747/20]

137. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if the tender process for the construction of the J14 link road and Bracken link road, Sandyford, has been completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14748/20]

138. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if the appointment of contractors for the construction of the J14 link road and Bracken link road, Sandyford, has been completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14749/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 136 to 138, inclusive, together.

The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads (RLR) is the statutory responsibility of each local authority, in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from local authorities’ own resources supplemented by State road grants, where applicable. In the case of the four Dublin Councils, since the revision of the arrangements for the retention of Local Property Tax in 2015 these Councils are required to largely self-fund their road programmes.

As the statutory road authority for their area, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council is responsible for the implementation of this project. My Department is not funding any element of this scheme under the Regional and Local Road Grant Programme and I have no function in relation to the tender and contract award process.

In view of the above I would suggest that contact is made with Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council directly for updates on this project.

National Vehicle and Driver File

139. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will address a matter regarding a dealership number in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14784/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department through the National Vehicle and Driver File (NVDF) maintains a record of the ‘registered owners’ of motor vehicles in this State. Central to this is notifications of vehicle ownership changes from motor dealers. In the administration of this system, motor dealers are issued with an identity number from my Department where they meet the specified criteria.

My officials in the Driver and Vehicle Computer Services Division (DVCSD), who manage the NVDF, have no record of receiving an application from your constituent. However I have asked my officials to contact the person concerned directly, using the details provided, to discuss the matter and address his concerns.

Cycling Facilities

140. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the cost of daily disinfecting and cleaning the public bike scheme in Cork, Dublin, Limerick and Waterford in each area in tabular form. [14812/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): 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.

School Transport

141. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he has approved the cancellation by Dublin Bus of all school transport contracts operated by private bus companies in the Dublin area; his plans for the way in which those private bus operators that depend on school transport contracts will continue in business if the school transport contracts are cancelled; his further plans for the way in which and by which service operator a comprehensive school transport service is to be provided at least to the level previously provided when the schools reopen if the private school transport contracts are cancelled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14954/20]

265. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will

address a series of matters relating to the non-renewal of school transport contracts (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15964/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 141 and 265 together.

As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The School Transport Scheme comes under the remit of my colleague the Minister for Education and Skills. Bus services outside of that scheme are part of the overall public transport sector. Day-to-day management and operational aspects of public transport are the responsibility of the individual operators, in this case Dublin Bus, in conjunction with the National Transport Authority (NTA).

Accordingly, I have forwarded the Deputy's questions to Dublin Bus for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Driver Test

142. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the consultation with driving instructors that has taken place with the view to restarting driver tests; if he is satisfied appropriate guidelines will be in place to resume testing and lessons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14955/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The RSA has been 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 Safely Protocol as agreed by employer and trade union representatives.

On Monday 29 June, driving tests resumed on a gradual basis for trucks, buses and motorcycles. Driving test for cars, vans and minibuses are expected to commence on a phased basis this week and the RSA will prioritise tests for essential workers in the first instance. The resumption of services is dependent on strict protocols being in place for staff and customers in order to comply with public health guidelines.

The RSA wrote to Approved Driving Instructors on 22 June, informing them of the imminent resumption of driver testing and is in regular communication with this sector. The Authority included a series of Frequently Asked Questions, which provided details of the protocols being applied to driver testing in order to comply with health requirements in line with Government's Protocol on Returning to Work Safely. These protocols may assist driving instructors in taking the necessary measures resuming their business safely.

The RSA cannot dictate to driving schools on how they should run their business, or issue medical advice. Approved Driving Instructors are independent contractors and have personal responsibility to follow the Government Protocols. It is up to each driving instructor or driving school to protect themselves, their families and communities by adhering to the official Government guidelines on hygiene and social distancing.

While the RSA is responsible for driver testing and took the original decision to close the driver testing service during the pandemic, the RSA has no authority to order a suspension or resumption of driving instruction. This is done by driving instructors and schools in light of national policy and taking into account their own personal circumstances.

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 Covid-19 requirements.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

143. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the way in which he plans to support the thousands of workers employed in airlines and the airline industry in view of the huge challenges now facing the sector due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14956/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The aviation industry is one of the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and all airlines have seen severe depletion of revenue and are facing various degrees of financial challenge.

In order to assist businesses and protect employment, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for companies of all sizes, including those in the aviation sector, which includes the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates, deferred tax liabilities, and the ISIF Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund for medium and large enterprises. 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 the weeks and months ahead.

The Aviation Recovery Taskforce, announced on 10 June and which first met on 12 June, was requested to set out recommendations for consideration by Ministers and Government on what needs to be done to assist the Irish aviation sector to recover from the COVID-19 crisis. The taskforce published an interim report on 23 June and a final report on Friday 10 July. These recommendations will be considered in the ongoing work to manage the impact of Covid 19 on aviation and the wider economy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

144. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the amount of funding requested by each airline in view of the challenges facing the sector due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14957/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department is assessing the financial impact of Covid on the Irish airline sector on an ongoing basis. The sector was represented on the Aviation Recovery Taskforce and the final report of this group was recently published on my Department's website. The recommendations contained in this Report will be considered as appropriate in the context of the ongoing work to manage the impact of Covid 19 on aviation and the wider economy.

In order to assist businesses and protect employment, the Government has already put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for companies of all sizes, including those in the airline sector, which includes the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme and the ISIF Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund. It remains open to airlines to engage directly with the relevant agencies concerned with a view to drawing down such supports. The amount of any funding sought by each airline would be a commercial matter for the airlines concerned.

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Driver Test

145. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if consideration will be given to prioritising front-line workers who are waiting for driver tests due to the postponement during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14968/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The RSA has been 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 the National Return to Work Safely Protocol, as agreed by employer and trade union representatives.

Driver testing services restarted, on a phased basis, during Phase 3 of the Government's road map for the easing of Covid19 restrictions. On Monday 29 June, driving tests resumed on a gradual basis for trucks, buses and motorcycles. Fourteen driving test centres reopened initially, but as the number of tests and categories of vehicles being tested increases in the coming weeks, the remaining 38 test centres will reopen. The RSA will update its website, rsa.ie to advise on each centre as they re-open.

Following the publication by Government of a revised Phase 3 roadmap for reopening Ireland, driving tests for cars, vans and minibuses are now expected to resume on 16 July on a phased basis. The RSA will prioritise tests for those who are in the emergency services and who contacted them during the suspension of the service. Initially, only those who are frontline healthcare workers will be deemed eligible for an urgent test slot.

It should be understood that there will be pressure on the available capacity when driver testing resumes. It must also be borne in mind that for all categories, at least for the initial resumption, it is almost certain that fewer daily tests will be conducted by each driver tester. Therefore, while there will be some availability for urgent tests, the RSA's capacity to make these available to all cases will be limited. The RSA will keep the position under review as they move through the service resumption. The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time.

Railway Stations

146. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to conduct an impact assessment on the future limitations to capacity at Connolly Station that the proposed planning application at 115 Amiens Street will have; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15017/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day management and operations of public transport.

Any plans to conduct an impact assessment on transport capacity at Connolly Station in connection with any particular planning application would be a matter for Córas Iompair Éireann (CIÉ), in conjunction with Iarnród Éireann. Therefore, I have forwarded the Deputy's question to CIÉ for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

147. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the criteria for the allocation of Covid-19 funding support for the sport sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15115/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): A funding package of up to €70 million was announced on Friday 19th June to support the sport sector, which has been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The funding package will be administered by Sport Ireland, which is the statutory body with responsibility for the development of sport.

This funding package includes;

- Funding of up to €40m for the three main field sports organisations – the FAI, the GAA and the IRFU.

- a Resilience Fund of up to €10m to support the National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs),

- a Sports Club Resilience Fund of up to €15m to support clubs, and

- a Sports Restart and Renewal Fund of up to €5m.

The allocation of this funding to individual NGBs or clubs has not yet been determined. The funding will be invested through new grant schemes which are currently being developed. It is expected that the precise terms of each of the new grant schemes will be announced by Sport Ireland later this month and Sport Ireland will announce an open invitation to applications from funded bodies for assistance under the grant schemes.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

148. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the supports available to taxi drivers who have been impacted from Covid-19 and have still been unable to return to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15213/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I recognise that from the onset of the COVID-19 Emergency and the introduction of restrictions as part of the necessary public health response, passenger demand for taxis and other small public service vehicle (SPSV) services fell considerably and many operators stopped working.

In recognition of the challenges facing businesses, the Government put in place a range of measures to assist businesses during the current COVID-19 pandemic, including the COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme, the COVID-19 Restart Grant, and a waiver of commercial rates. Self-employed owner operators of SPSVs may also avail of the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

Over the past few months, the National Transport Authority (NTA), which is the body under the aegis of my Department with responsibility for regulating the SPSV sector, has undertaken a number of measures to assist operators in the industry including waivers, facilitating temporary licence suspensions, interaction with the Insurance industry, and providing guidance to operators on cleaning and other ways to reduce the risk of spreading Covid-19.

At the present time, while the financial supports mentioned continue to be available, the

focus now is on assisting those who have stopped working to get back to work as the economy reopens and passenger demand for SPSVs returns. My Department is in regular contact with the NTA to monitor the impact that the reopening of the economy in line with the Government's Roadmap to Reopening Society and Business is having on demand for SPSV services and to ensure that SPSV operators who have temporarily stopped working are well placed to return to work.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

149. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on the proposal presented by an organisation (details supplied); and if he will engage with the organisation and respond to its proposals. [15324/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department has been in discussion with the organisation concerned in relation to these proposals, which I am currently pursuing with Government colleagues.

The health, leisure and fitness sector plays an important role in improving the health and wellbeing of the Irish population and I am aware that it has been significantly impacted by both the three-month closure and the continuing capacity constraints associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The sector is also an important source of employment for young people in particular, in positions such as lifeguards, fitness instructors, swim teachers and summer camp coaches. It has been estimated that some two-thirds of the total sector workforce of 12,000 is aged 34 years and under.

Work on the preparation of the July Stimulus package is nearing completion. I believe that it will contain a series of measures and supports that will be of benefit to this sector.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

150. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when Sport Ireland will announce the opening of applications for assistance under the €70 million grant scheme; and the process sporting clubs can apply for this funding. [15325/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): A funding package of up to €70 million was announced on Friday 19th June to support the sport sector, which has been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The funding package will be administered by Sport Ireland, which is the statutory body with responsibility for the development of sport.

This funding package includes;

- Funding of up to €40m for the three main field sports organisations – the FAI, the GAA and the IRFU.

- a Resilience Fund of up to €10m to support the National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs),

- a Sports Club Resilience Fund of up to €15m to support clubs, and

- a Sports Restart and Renewal Fund of up to €5m.

The allocation of this funding to individual NGBs or clubs has not yet been determined. The funding will be invested through new grant schemes which are currently being developed. It is expected that the precise terms of each of the new grant schemes will be announced by Sport Ireland later this month and Sport Ireland will announce an open invitation to applications from funded bodies for assistance under the grant schemes.

Public Transport

151. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the position regarding the Irish Rail Rosslare line service (details supplied); and when the normal schedule will return. [15343/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding relating to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport.

The issue raised is a matter for Iarnród Éireann, in conjunction with the National Transport Authority, and I have therefore referred the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply.

Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

152. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to provide grants to private bus companies that have lost all their income since March 2020 as a result of Covid-19 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15362/20]

229. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the date the temporary funding supports announced on 25 June 2020 will issue to private bus operators; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15400/20]

230. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the engagement he and relevant State agencies have had with representative bodies in the private bus transport sector; the dates such engagements took place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15401/20]

271. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if specific measures to assist the bus and coach sector will be included in the July stimulus package; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16118/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 152, 229, 230 and 271 together.

As Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport.

My Department has been engaging directly with the Coach Tourism & Transport Council of Ireland (CTTC) on a regular basis in relation to the impact of Covid-19 on the public transport sector. Formal meetings took place between the Department and the CTTC on: 20/05, 27/05, 03/06, 10/06 and 26/06 and a further meeting is scheduled for 17 July. There has also been ex-

tensive informal engagement with the commercial bus sector both by the Department and by the National Transport Authority (NTA).

From my Department's engagement with their representatives, and indeed from the NTA's regular engagement with them throughout the crisis, I understand the very difficult business environment that the commercial bus operators are now dealing with. Indeed, across Government we are acutely aware that the Covid-19 situation presents huge challenges for many business sectors.

It is critical for the sector to be functioning so that it can carry the passengers that we need to return to work and to other activities as they re-open. Many of these operators provide essential transport services for people who need to get to work and are vital to ensure economic recovery.

For that reason, I am pleased to advise the Deputies that on 25 June the Government approved temporary funding supports, in accordance with EU and national legislation, for the licensed bus sector. These supports are aimed at ensuring the continued operation of essential licensed bus services for a period of up to six months. The package will be restricted to operators where a clear public interest justification supports such intervention and will be targeted at compensating the gap between specified costs and the revenues generated on the services. The NTA, as the public transport licensing agency, is responsible for administering funding support through the establishment of contracts between the NTA and the relevant operators.

This is, of course, additional to the wider programme of Government supports for impacted businesses were introduced, including new schemes of wage subsidies, rates waivers, re-start grants, lending facilities, equity injection, and business advisory supports for example. Consideration of projects to be included in the July Stimulus Plan will be taken by Government shortly.

With the commencement of Phase 3 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business on 29 June 2020, changes to the existing public transport social distancing restrictions were agreed, allowing a move from 2 metres social distancing to utilising 50% of the passenger-carrying capacity of fleet. This will help to underpin public transport services provided by both public and commercial licensed operators during these unprecedented times, with a view to safeguarding public transport capacity in Phases 3 and 4 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

Alongside this change, the wearing of a face covering when using public transport is now mandatory, with the exception of those who cannot do so for health reasons or due to young age.

Sports Events

153. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide the reports conducted by his Department into the return to play protocols for contact sports, including medical advice from the Chief Medical Officer among other public documents. [15629/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): There are no reports of the type described in the Deputy's question. The Expert Advisory Group on the Return to Sport, which was established by my predecessor and which includes medical personnel from the sports sector, has the remit to provide guidance - in line with the public health advice from the public health authorities - to Ireland's sporting bodies so that they can prepare for the phased return to sporting activity in line with the Government Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

The National Governing Bodies of sport (NGBs) have developed protocols for returning to training and competition in their respective sports. The Expert Group assesses the consistency of the various protocols prepared by the NGBs with the Roadmap and provides general guidance and observations thereon via Sport Ireland. This guidance has been published by Sport Ireland on behalf of the Return to Sport Expert Group and is available on its website. Details of the protocols that the Expert Group has assessed to date are available on my Department's website.

The return to sport permitted in Phase 3 of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business applies to all sports from Monday, June 29th. It must be emphasised however that this resumption is subject to the Phases 3 and 4 restrictions on numbers for public gatherings and other important public health advice on social distancing, hygiene and respiratory etiquette and appropriate mechanisms to assist with contact tracing. The Expert Group on Return to Sport has accordingly encouraged a gradual and inclusive approach to the resumption of all sporting and fitness activities.

Tourism Industry

154. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when tourist offices can reopen under the revised Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business guidelines. [15892/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Tourist offices have been allowed to reopen since 29 June under the Roadmap for reopening Society and Business. The decision to reopen a tourist office is a matter for the relevant operators.

Harbours and Piers

155. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the funding provided to each local authority on the transfer of a harbour under the Harbours Act 2015; the date and amount of each transfer in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16096/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): In accordance with National Ports Policy and the provisions of the Harbours Act 2015 4 Ports of Regional Significance have transferred to Local Authority Control.

Wicklow Port Company transferred to Wicklow County Council on 30 August 2016. Drogheda Port Company's shareholding was transferred to Louth County Council on 2 October 2017. Dun Laoghaire Harbour Company transferred to Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council on the 3 October 2018. New Ross Port Company transferred to Wexford County Council on 1st August 2019.

Galway Harbour is designated for transfer to Galway City Council and it is expected that the transfer will proceed in 2020.

Each Local Authority conducted due diligence in advance of taking over the relevant port and the Department provided funding of up to a maximum of €30,000 to each Local Authority toward the due diligence.

Wicklow County Council received €30,000 in October 2015.

Louth County Council received €30,000 in December 2015.

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Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council received €18,450 in January 2016 and €11,550 in April 2016 (Total €30,000).

Wexford County Council received €30,000 in December 2016.

Road Projects

156. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of the M11 and N11 junction upgrade; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16097/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Climate, Energy, Communications, Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and securing exchequer funding in relation to the National Roads Programme.

Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 and in line with the current National Development Plan (NDP), the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. This is also subject to the Public Spending Code Guidelines and the necessary statutory approvals.

In this context, TII is best placed to advise you on the status of this project.

Noting the above position, I have referred your question to TII for a direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Noise Pollution

157. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he is considering introducing legislation or providing funding to reduce the impact of noise from motorways in particular the M50; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16098/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Climate, Energy, Communications, Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and securing exchequer funding in relation to the National Roads Programme.

Once funding arrangements have been put in place with Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, the planning, design and construction, including noise mitigation measures, for individual national roads is a matter for TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

Directive 2002/49/EC on the assessment and management of environmental noise was transposed into Irish law by the Environmental Noise Regulations, 2006. This legislation requires TII and local authorities to undertake strategic noise mapping every five years for all major roads carrying in excess of 8,250 annual average daily traffic (AADT). Noise maps identify and prioritise cluster areas which will require further assessment and may require mitigation measures to be put in place. Once strategic noise maps have been produced, the results are used for each local authority to develop Noise Action Plans as required by the Environmental Noise Regulations.

In relation to motorways, and the M50 in particular, I have referred your question to TII for a more detailed and direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Driver Licences

158. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the reason driver licence centres will not accept cash; the way in which persons without bank cards are to be accommodated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16113/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As this is an operational matter for the Road Safety Authority (RSA), I have referred your question to the Authority for direct response. If you do not receive a response within 10 working days, please contact my office directly.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

159. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the further steps he plans to take to assist tourist and hospitality businesses that are very seriously affected by Covid-19 to survive financially through the crisis, taking into account their importance economically, socially and culturally to Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15664/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Programme for Government contains a commitment that the Government will publish a series of immediate actions to support the economy - the “July Stimulus”. In this context the Government will, among other things, consider further additional measures that may be needed to support the tourism and hospitality sector.

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 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 put in place a number of supports for the tourism and hospitality sector. Details of these are available on Fáilte Ireland’s website.

My predecessor also established the Tourism Recovery Taskforce on 20th May 2020 to prepare a Tourism Recovery Plan. This 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 Taskforce has submitted an initial report.

Rail Network

160. **Deputy Ciarán Cannon** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when the findings will be published of the financial and economic appraisal of proposals to extend the western rail corridor (details supplied). [14668/20]

165. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when he plans to publish the rail review report on the western rail corridor from Athenry, County Galway, to Claremorris, County Mayo; when a decision on the report will be made; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14704/20]

201. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans

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to publish the report prepared by a company (details supplied) in respect of the western rail corridor from Athenry to Claremorris; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15129/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 160, 165 and 201 together.

As the Deputies are aware Iarnród Éireann commissioned a financial and economic appraisal of a proposed reopening of Phases 2 and 3 of the Western Rail Corridor, and, in late 2019, submitted a draft copy of that appraisal to my Department.

I am informed that in recent days a final copy of the report has now been received.

As was signalled publicly at the time of the commissioning of the appraisal, and, as is required under the Public Spending Code (PSC), my Department has been reviewing the documentation that has been received and engaging with Iarnród Éireann and the consultants as required during this review.

Once that review is complete the matter will then be brought to Government for its decision and the report published as soon as practical thereafter.

Covid-19 Pandemic

161. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views and advice in respect of a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14669/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The NPHE, together with a team of national experts, decided which businesses could resume trading in each Phase of the gradual reopening of our economy, and they included driving schools on the list of businesses cleared to reopen on 29 June. It is not the role of the NPHE to provide guidance in relation to specific sectors, as a rule.

A National Return to Work Safely Protocol has been produced under the aegis of the Labour Employer Economic Forum and is the result of a collaborative effort by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), the Health Services Executive (HSE) and the Department of Health and the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. The HSA has in turn produced COVID-19 checklists and templates, based on the Protocol, to help employers, business owners and managers to get their business up and running again and to inform workers about what they need to do to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace.

The RSA has developed protocols, as any employer must, to apply the overall protocols to its particular needs, including in relation to driver testing. In doing so, it was assisted by the overall national protocol and also by the additional templates and checklists from the HSA. I understand that the National Office of Traffic Medicine was also available to the RSA to assist in its task.

In anticipation of the resumption of driver testing on 29 June, the RSA wrote to each Approved Driving Instructor on 22 June, advising them of the planned phased return of driver testing. The Authority included a series of Frequently Asked Questions, which provided details of the protocols being applied to driver testing in order to comply with health requirements in line with Government's Protocol on Returning to Work Safely. These protocols may assist driving instructors in taking the necessary measures resuming their business safely.

However, the RSA cannot dictate to driving schools on how they should run their business, or issue medical advice. It is up to each driving instructor or driving school to protect themselves, their families and communities by adhering to the official Government guidelines on hygiene and social distancing.

However, I have noted the specific point and concerns raised in this correspondence and I have forwarded the Deputy's question and the relevant correspondence to the RSA for a comprehensive response. Please notify my office if you have not received a response from the RSA within 10 days.

I understand that any business 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 Covid-19 requirements.

Road Projects

162. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of timelines for the M20 Cork to Limerick road; and if funding has been ring-fenced for the construction of the road. [14697/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Climate, Energy, Communications and Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and securing exchequer funding in relation to the National Roads Programme.

Once funding arrangements have been put in place with Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 and in line with the National Development Plan (NDP), the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. This is also subject to the requirements of the Public Spending Code Guidelines and necessary statutory approvals.

In this context, TII is best placed to advise on the current status and funding of this proposed project, pending also the Government's proposed review of the NDP.

Noting the above position, I have referred your question, on this occasion to TII for a direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Road Projects

163. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if funding has been ring-fenced for the northern relief road at Mallow, County Cork. [14698/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Climate, Energy, Communications and Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and securing exchequer funding in relation to the National Roads Programme.

Once funding arrangements have been put in place with Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 and in line with the National Development Plan (NDP), the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. This is also subject to the Public Spending Code Guidelines and the necessary statutory approvals.

In this context, TII is best placed to advise you on this matter, pending also the Govern-

ment's proposed review of the NDP.

Noting the above position, I have referred your question, on this occasion, to TII for a direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

National Transport Authority

164. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if an NTA office will be created in Cork city to deal with transport infrastructure demands in the city and county. [14699/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport.

In that regard the Deputy will be aware that this Government is committed to a fundamental change in the nature of transport in Ireland. In relation to our major cities that change will be driven by delivering upon the sustainable mobility projects and programmes outlined, or to be developed, in their metropolitan area transport strategies.

In Cork, the Cork Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy provides the evidence based, strategic backdrop to investment in the coming years and this Government has committed to its implementation. My Department is funding the NTA's establishment of a BusConnects Cork office this year and while the location and organisation of NTA facilities and staff is a matter for the NTA, I am interested in exploring potential synergies that might exist with the Programme for Government's commitment to establish Regional Design Offices for cycling similar to the model already used in relation to national roads.

Question No. 165 answered with Question No. 160.

Covid-19 Pandemic

166. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to ensure the enforcement of compulsory face coverings on all public transport services; when he expects enforcement to commence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14705/20]

173. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the way in which he plans to ensure compliance with mask wearing by members of the public on public transport in the interests of worker and passenger safety. [14833/20]

183. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the steps being taken to monitor and enforce the wearing of face coverings and masks on public transport; the penalties that apply to those that do not comply; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14970/20]

184. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the alternative public transport arrangements available for commuters who, for valid reasons, are unable to wear face coverings and masks on public transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14971/20]

272. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his

plans to introduce enforcement powers to make the wearing of masks on public transport mandatory; and if so, when the powers will be introduced. [16119/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 166, 173, 183, 184 and 272 together.

Following the commencement of Phase 3 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business on 29 June 2020, changes to the existing public transport social distancing restrictions were agreed, allowing a move from 2 metres social distancing to utilising 50% of the passenger-carrying capacity of public transport fleet. This will help to underpin public transport services during these unprecedented times, with a view to safeguarding public transport capacity in Phases 3 and 4 of the Roadmap for Re-opening Society and Business.

Alongside this change, it was also decided that the wearing of a face covering when using public transport would be made mandatory. The Regulations for the mandatory wearing of face coverings on public transport were introduced under Health legislation on 10 July and came into effect on Monday 13 July.

Public health advice tells us that face coverings are an important safety measure, especially in interior spaces, but that they are not suitable for every individual. Recognising this, the new Regulations do not apply to children under the age of 13. Reflecting public health advice, the Regulations also allow that wearing a face covering is not required where a person has a “reasonable excuse”, and this includes where a person

- cannot put on, wear or remove a face covering because of any physical or mental illness, impairment or disability or without severe distress,
- needs to communicate with another person who has difficulties communicating,
- removes the face covering to provide emergency assistance or to provide care or assistance to a vulnerable person, or
- removes the face covering to take medication.

The NTA is engaging with public transport operators regarding implementation of the Regulations. The NTA is also making arrangements for an easy and discreet way for vulnerable people who have a reasonable excuse for not wearing a face covering to communicate this with relevant public transport staff. It will be a voluntary arrangement for passengers who wish to use it, and will be similar to the recently-introduced JAM (just a minute) card.

The Regulations are implementable by a “relevant person” who is defined as any officer, employee or agent of a public transport operator or of the NTA. A relevant person implementing the Regulations can seek the assistance of An Garda Síochána where needed.

Where a passenger is not wearing a face covering, a relevant person under the Regulations may:

- request the passenger to wear a face covering,
- refuse the passenger entry to the public transport vehicle, or
- request the passenger to alight from the vehicle. Failure to comply is an offence and there are penalties (on summary conviction) for non-compliance.

Operators are already reporting high levels of compliance by passengers. I expect this to grow in the coming days as people understand the importance of protecting their fellow pas-

sengers and staff. It is not intended that enforcement or penalties will be needed often; but they are now available if necessary.

Covid-19 Pandemic

167. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the reason Bus Éireann buses nationally do not have screens fitted that could help drivers and passengers to mitigate the spread of Covid- 19; if there are plans to provide such screens to its fleet; the estimated cost of same; and the time frame envisioned for this to take place. [14778/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTAS) I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. Day-to-day management and operational aspects of public transport are the responsibility of the individual operators - in this case Bus Éireann - in conjunction with the NTA

Accordingly, I have forwarded the Deputy's question to Bus Éireann for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

The Deputy will also be aware that Regulations for the mandatory wearing of face coverings on public transport were introduced under Health legislation on 10 July and came into effect on Monday 13 July. The Regulations also provide that, for vehicles where there is no screen between driver and passenger, the driver is required to wear a face covering when passengers are boarding or alighting from a vehicle.

Driver Licences

168. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if a plastic copy of a licence will issue to a person (details supplied) as soon as possible; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14782/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The regulation of the small public service vehicle (SPSV) industry, including SPSV licensing, 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.

Ministerial Responsibilities

169. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide a copy of the Departmental briefings received by him and each Minister of State in his Department upon taking up each individual role; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14810/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My officials provided a comprehensive briefing document to me on my appointment as Minister. It is my intention to publish the document (redacted where necessary) shortly.

I would also like to advise the Deputy that the PfG briefing material for my Department has been published and the documents are located at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7b927-programme-for-government-documents/>

Driver Licences

170. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the date on which the issuing of road haulage licences will commence; the number of pending applications; and the anticipated timeframe required to clear the backlog. [14819/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I understand that the Deputy is asking about the issuing of Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) licences and not Haulage Licences.

The National Driver Licence Service (NDLS), provided by the Road Safety Authority issues driver licences and learner permits. The NDLS resumed services on Monday 8 June 2020. The service resumed on a gradual basis and by Monday 29 June all NDLS centres, except Clifden and Belmullet, had reopened. Further information on the resumption of the NDLS service can be found on the website www.ndls.ie.

I have referred the question relating to the number of pending applications and the anticipated time frame required to clear any backlog that may exist to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response is not received within 10 days.

Driver Licences

171. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to change the driver licence criteria that would allow licenceholders in category D and D1 to drive vehicles in category CE and C1E. [14820/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I have no plans to change the driver licence criteria that would allow licence holders in category D and D1 to drive vehicles in category CE and C1E.

Category D and D1 relate to buses, while category CE and C1E relate to trucks. While there are similarities, there are also different competencies required when passing a test for driving a bus (responsibility in respect to the carriage of passengers) or a truck (vehicle loading).

Sports Funding

172. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will give final approval to a grant for a project (details supplied) under the large-scale sporting infrastructure scheme in view of the recommendation by the former Minister of State that the project would be funded following the results of the appeals process; if the matter will be given urgent priority in view of the amount of time that the applicant has waited since the application was made and the merits of the project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14830/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The National Sports Policy was published in 2018 and provided for a new Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF). The aim of the fund is to provide Exchequer support for larger sports capital proj-

ects where the Exchequer investment is greater than the maximum amount available under the Sports Capital Programme. The first grants under the new scheme were announced in January of this year.

An application was submitted by Clare County Council in respect of the project referred to by the Deputy. As the total funding applied for under the scheme significantly exceeded the funding available, it was not possible to provide funding to all projects. The application in question did not score sufficiently highly to warrant a provisional allocation in the grant announcements made in January.

All unsuccessful applicants were given the opportunity to appeal the Department's decision if it was felt that an error was made in the assessment process. All appeals have now been assessed by officials who were not involved in the initial assessment process and a final decision on the appeals will be made shortly.

Question No. 173 answered with Question No. 166.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

174. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the financial supports available for self-employed persons, including taxi drivers, to assist them getting back to work post-Covid-19. [14835/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I recognise that from the onset of the COVID-19 Emergency and the introduction of restrictions as part of the necessary public health response, passenger demand for taxis and other small public service vehicle (SPSV) services fell considerably and many operators stopped working.

In recognition of the challenges facing businesses, the Government put in place a range of measures to assist businesses during the current COVID-19 pandemic, including the COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme, the COVID-19 Restart Grant, and a waiver of commercial rates. Self-employed owner operators of SPSVs may also avail of the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

Over the past few months, the National Transport Authority (NTA), which is the body under the aegis of my Department with responsibility for regulating the SPSV sector, has undertaken a number of measures to assist operators in the industry including waivers, facilitating temporary licence suspensions, interaction with the Insurance industry, and providing guidance to operators on cleaning and other ways to reduce the risk of spreading Covid-19.

The focus now is on assisting those who have stopped working to get back to work as the economy reopens and passenger demand for SPSVs returns. My Department is in regular contact with the NTA to monitor the impact that the reopening of the economy in line with the Government's Roadmap to Reopening Society and Business is having on demand for SPSV services and to ensure that SPSV operators who have temporarily stopped working are well placed to return to work.

Road Projects

175. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the preparations being made for the development of the north ring road in Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14839/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Climate, Energy, Communications and Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and securing exchequer funding in relation to the National Roads Programme.

Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 and in line with the National Development Plan (NDP), the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. This is also subject to the Public Spending Code Guidelines and the necessary statutory approvals.

In this context, TII is best placed to advise you on this matter, pending also the Government's proposed review of the NDP.

Noting the above position, I have referred your question, on this occasion, to TII for a direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Road Projects

176. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when he will review the national roads plans. [14902/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Climate, Energy, Communications, Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and securing exchequer funding in relation to the National Roads Programme.

Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, and in line with the National Development Plan (NDP), the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

TII ultimately delivers the National Roads Programme in line with Project Ireland 2040, the National Planning Framework and the NDP.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to bring forward the planned review of the NDP from 2022 and use the review to set out an updated NDP for the period to 2031. The review of the NDP will be aligned with the National Planning Framework and Project Ireland 2040. Work is underway within my Department to contribute to this planned review. Questions in relation to the review of the NDP generally may be addressed to my colleague the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

Sports Capital Programme

177. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when the next sports capital programme will commence. [14903/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Sports Capital Programme (SCP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country.

The most recent (2018) round of the SCP attracted a record 2,337 applications. Allocations were announced in January, May and November of last year with a total of over €56 million awarded to 1,648 different projects.

All unsuccessful applicants were given the opportunity to appeal the Department's decision. In relation to the capital grants announced in November, a total of 122 appeals were submitted by the December deadline. The review of these appeals was completed in April with 6 new allocations approved.

Following the finalisation of the appeals process, a full Review of the 2018 round of the SCP was undertaken. This Review is currently under consideration and includes recommendations for some changes to the terms and conditions of the next round of the SCP. I understand that this is expected to be finalised shortly and a decision on the timing of a new round of the SCP will be taken after that.

Road Projects

178. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the timelines for the delivery of the new M20 motorway between Cork; and the milestones he expects to be reached in 2020 and 2021 in relation to the project in chronological order. [14915/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Climate, Energy, Communications and Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and securing exchequer funding in relation to the National Roads Programme.

Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 and in line with the National Development Plan (NDP), the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. This is also subject to the Public Spending Code Guidelines and the necessary statutory approvals.

In this context, TII is best placed to advise on this matter, pending also the Government's proposed review of the NDP.

Noting the above position, I have referred your question, on this occasion, to TII for a direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

179. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extra funding he plans to provide to national sporting bodies in 2020 to assist with Covid-19. [14918/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): A funding package of up to €70 million was announced on Friday 19th June to support the sport sector, which has been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The funding package will be administered by Sport Ireland, which is the statutory body with responsibility for the development of sport.

This funding package includes;

- Funding of up to €40m for the three main field sports organisations – the FAI, the GAA and the IRFU.

- a Resilience Fund of up to €10m to support the National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs),

- a Sports Club Resilience Fund of up to €15m to support clubs, and

- a Sports Restart and Renewal Fund of up to €5m.

The funding will be invested through new grant schemes which are currently being developed. It is expected that the precise terms of each of the new grant schemes will be announced by Sport Ireland later this month.

Sport Ireland will announce an open invitation to applications from funded bodies for assistance under the grant schemes.

Tourism Policy

180. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to extend the domestic tourism season in 2019 outside of those already announced to date. [14919/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I understand the Deputy has clarified that he is referring to 2020.

Fáilte Ireland unveiled its new national domestic marketing campaign, 'Ireland, make a break for it', to the tourism and hospitality industry on 25th June 2020 and it has since gone live across all media. This is a major drive to encourage people to take domestic breaks this summer.

I have referred the Deputy's Question to Fáilte Ireland for further details. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Driver Test

181. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will address a matter regarding the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14945/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): This is an operational matter for the Road Safety Authority. I have therefore referred the Question to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

Public Transport

182. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the geographical units used regarding investment by his Department; and the transport co-ordination unit investment delivered in each of these geographical units for the past five years. [14962/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I understand that this Question is a follow up to the Deputy's Question on 16 June (PQ 10972/20 ref 848), which related to funding for the 15 Transport Coordination Units (TCUs) nationwide, also known as Local Link Offices.

As my predecessor advised the Deputy in his reply on 16 June, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport has responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport, and 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 na-

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tional responsibility for integrated local and rural transport, including management of the Rural Transport Programme (RTP) which now operates under the Local Link brand.

My Department provides aggregate funding for Local Link services to the NTA, which in turn allocates the funding to the individual TCUs. The TCUs manage the day to day requests for, and delivery of, public transport services. The funding from my Department is primarily current funding with a small amount of capital funding. My Department does not provide any Local Link funding directly to individual TCUs.

I understand that the NTA replied to the Deputy on 29 June explaining that it allocates funding to individual TCUs, rather than on a county by county basis. In addition, the NTA provided the Deputy with details of the funding for all 15 TCUs for the period 2015-2019.

Questions Nos. 183 and 184 answered with Question No. 166.

Driver Test

185. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the reason driver testers who were employed by the RSA on contract and whose contracts ended on 1 May 2020 did not have their contracts renewed or extended; the further reason driver testers employed on contract which ended on the 25 June 2020 had their contracts extended by four months; the basis on which the matter was decided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14981/20]

186. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the basis on which driver testers with the RSA who are on temporary contracts are selected for permanent contracts; if all such permanent contracts are awarded on this basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14982/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 185 and 186 together.

These matters are the responsibility of the Road Safety Authority. I have therefore referred the Questions to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

Greenways Provision

187. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when a project (details supplied) will proceed to the next stage; if this proposed development will be prioritised in view of the cross-Border tourism potential; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14990/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy will be aware, a specific reference to this Greenway is included in the Programme for Government and it is also referenced in New Decade, New Approach as an important cross-border project.

Leitrim County Council submitted an application to my Department for funding support under the Carbon Tax fund. That fund will support the planning and design of Greenway projects to assist them to be shovel-ready when construction funding is available. Applications for 40 projects were made and I hope to announce the outcome of this call in the very near future.

Covid-19 Pandemic

188. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of flights from the United States of America; if his attention has been drawn to a recent EU recommendation on restricting such flights to help mitigate the spread of Covid-19; the supporting measures in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14996/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Current public health advice is to avoid all non-essential international travel into Ireland. The frequency of flights operating into Ireland from the United States is currently very low and passenger numbers are a fraction of normal levels. The few flights that are operating from the US are facilitating the repatriation of citizens, the movement of essential workers to Ireland and the maintenance of essential cargo supply lines.

All persons arriving into Ireland from overseas are legally obliged to complete a COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form and are expected to self-isolate for a period of 14 days.

The position remains under review by the public health authorities, having regard to the epidemiological situation in Europe and internationally, and further guidance on international travel will be announced by Government later this month.

Bus Services

189. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when mediation will begin between the National Transport Authority and a service (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15007/20]

190. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the position regarding the procurement of nine LocalLink routes in County Clare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15008/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 189 and 190 together.

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. It also has national responsibility for integrated local and rural transport, including management of the Rural Transport Programme which now operates under the Local Link brand.

Noting this, I have forward 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

191. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will offer guidance to persons who have booked overseas travel during the period of time when official health guidance is to avoid such travel but in circumstances in which the airlines and-or tour operators are refusing to offer compensation or credit for deferrals or cancellations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15037/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy is aware, current Government advice to people is to avoid all non-essential travel overseas, based on the advices of our public health experts. However, there are no flight restrictions in place in Ireland, and there have not been any at any stage since the Government first responded to the threat from Covid-19. This means that the operation of flights remains a commercial decision for airlines. People can still travel if they consider that it is essential to do so and so long as they comply with self-isolation requirements on their return.

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. For information on the process for escalating complaints regarding refunds for cancellations to the Commission for Aviation Regulation visit www.flihtights.ie. 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. That said, I understand that the main Irish airlines are currently allowing customers who are booked to travel over the summer months to move their flights with zero change fee. Where flights are cancelled by the airlines, people are entitled to a full cash refund.

Under the EU Package Travel Directive, consumers have the right to a refund of all payments where a package holiday is cancelled by the customer or the organiser due to unavoidable and extraordinary circumstances. The Government's travel restrictions constitute such circumstances, and advice on this is available on the Department of Transport web site.

Whilst consumers are entitled to a full cash refund, they can also agree to accept a Refund Credit Note instead of cash. If they do, then the State will stand over the cash value of that Note in the event that the issuer goes out of business. If customers are having problems receiving their refunds from travel agents/tour operators they have recourse to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, who can be contacted at www.ccpc.ie or on their helpline 01 402 5555.

Clearly the existing consumer protections and legal obligations on airlines and the broader travel sector did not envisage the current circumstances of mass cancellations and stringent travel restrictions across the Globe. That has, not surprisingly, put the entire system under immense pressure and it is causing real difficulties for people and businesses. I am mindful that the options put forward by airlines may not be fair or workable for customers in all instances, and it is something that I will be raising with the industry at the first available opportunity.

Ministerial Responsibilities

192. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for international and road transport and logistics; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15058/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy is aware, the Taoiseach has appointed Hildegarde Naughton, TD Minister of State attending cabinet with responsibility for International and Road Transport and Logistics. Officials are at present preparing the text of the necessary Government Order to formally delegate the agreed functions to Minister Naughton, and I expect this work to be completed shortly.

Local Authority Expenditure

193. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the amount

spent by each local authority on cycling and pedestrian infrastructure; and the details of each scheme by local authority in tabular form. [15067/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Deputy is aware that details of expenditure by local authorities is not a matter for my Department and I am not therefore in a position to answer for specific expenditure details for all 31 local authorities.

In 2019 my Department allocated approximately €71million to support walking and cycling through a number of different programmes, such as the active travel programme, the greenways programme and the roads programme. The vast majority of this funding is on infrastructure although some funding is also provided to support behavioural change type programmes.

The largest infrastructure programme is the active travel programme administered by the National Transport Authority which in turn allocates funding to individual local authorities, while other funding is provided by my Department to local authorities under the regional and local roads programme and the greenways programme.

However, the Deputy is likely aware that local authorities can also avail of funding to support walking and cycling infrastructure improvements through other programmes across Government, such as the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund and the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme and therefore funding provided by my Department or provided through agencies of my Department does not represent the totality of expenditure in local authority areas or by local authorities on walking and cycling infrastructure.

In relation to grants made directly by my Department to local authorities for walking and cycling infrastructure the details regarding same for 2019 will be collated and supplied to the Deputy in line with Standing Orders.

In relation to grants made by the National Transport Authority to local authorities for walking and cycling infrastructure in 2019 I have referred your question to the NTA for direct reply, please advise my Private Office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Driver Test

194. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to hire additional driver testers to clear the driver test backlog nationally. [15068/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): This is an operational matter for the Road Safety Authority. I have therefore referred the Question to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

195. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if employment incentives will be made available to the tourism sector for a new or developing small enterprise; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15077/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Programme for Government contains a commitment that the Government will publish a series of immediate actions to support the economy - the “July Stimulus”. In this context the Government will, among

other things, consider further additional measures that may be needed to support the tourism and hospitality sector.

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 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 put in place a number of supports for the tourism and hospitality sector. Details of these are available on Fáilte Ireland's website.

My predecessor also established the Tourism Recovery Taskforce on 20th May 2020 to prepare a Tourism Recovery Plan. This 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 Taskforce has submitted an initial report.

Local Authority Funding

196. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the funding the NTA has awarded to Kildare County Council in each of the years 2018, 2019 and 2020; the amount awarded to each individual scheme in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15080/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport, including the management of funds provided to the National Transport Authority (NTA) to carry out its functions.

Noting the NTA's responsibility in this 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.

Cycling Facilities

197. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on whether the public bike scheme in Cork should be expanded to county towns on rail links. [15083/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Deputy will know that I am very much in favour of increasing the number of people who choose to make active travel part of their daily journeys. I am glad to say that the Programme for Government - Our Shared Future contains a number of important commitments in the area of active travel, and indeed sustainable mobility generally, that I look forward to implementing in the months and years ahead.

The public bike schemes have been a great success since their launch and subsequent expansion and I am happy to hear the views of others as regards their potential future expansion. A significant contribution toward that success is to ensure the appropriate location of bike stations to allow for good circulation of bikes and people and ensure that individual stations contribute rather than detract from the overall system.

The Deputy raises an interesting point about integrating the schemes with transport hubs and will acknowledge the work already done in that regard in terms of both Kent Station and the Parnell Place Bus Station in Cork city centre.

The Deputy will be aware that 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 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.

Motor Tax

198. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will give consideration to the situation facing persons who have not been able to use their motor vehicles during the Covid-19 emergency period in view of the fact they cocooned on public health advice; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that many are now facing large bills from their local motor tax offices for arrears and that they were unable to avail of an off the road declaration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15089/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Up to 2013, vehicles were declared off the road retrospectively.

The Non-Use of Motor Vehicles Act came into effect on 1 July 2013. The primary purpose of the Act was to replace the system whereby a vehicle was declared off the road retrospectively with a system under which the vehicle must be declared off the road in advance. The procedure where vehicles were declared off the road retrospectively was non-verifiable, and was at the time estimated to be costing some €110m annually (a significant proportion of which were not considered to be genuine).

Under the new provisions, a 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.

Where a declaration is not made in advance, arrears of motor tax must be paid in full and motor tax paid for a minimum of 3 months before a declaration of non-use can then be made in the final month of the tax disc.

There are no plans to re-introduce retrospective declarations of non-use.

Motor Tax

199. **Deputy Noel Greally** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if there

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is legislation or policy to allow driving schools that had parked up vehicles for a number of months during lockdown to claim a refund on motor tax paid for that period of time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15096/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Motor tax legislation provides for refunds 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.

However, as you are aware, the Government has introduced a range of supports for Covid-impacted businesses generally, including new schemes of wage subsidies, rates waivers, restart grants, lending facilities, equity injection, and business advisory supports. You will also be aware that further stimulus measures will be announced later this month, to be followed by longer-term actions in the National Economic Plan, which will be published alongside Budget 2021.

Aviation Industry

200. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of the development of the aviation recovery plan through the establishment of the task force for aviation recovery; when the plan will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15124/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I am pleased to inform the Deputy that the Taskforce for Aviation Recovery has now completed its work and has produced its final report, which is available on the Department of Transport's web site. The report contains a number of recommendations aimed at ensuring that air travel can be reopened in a safe and sustainable manner and that can enable the re-establishment of Ireland's global connectivity over the coming period. I would like to thank the Taskforce's chairman, Chris Horn, and all the Taskforce members for their hard work in developing both an interim and final report to the challenging timeline that was set for them.

My Department will now evaluate the Report's recommendations, which will feed into the Government's plans to aid broader economic recovery – including in the aviation sector. A roadmap for the safe and sustainable recovery of aviation is essential because aviation is a criti-

cal enabler for the Irish economy, providing as it does essential connectivity along with many direct and indirect jobs.

I am very conscious of the severity of the current crisis for the sector, and of the importance of providing assurance to stakeholders.

Question No. 201 answered with Question No. 160.

Rail Network

202. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when he plans to develop a comprehensive policy for commuter services on all existing lines into Waterford, Limerick and Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15130/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, the National Transport Authority (NTA) is responsible for the provision of public transport services in conjunction with the relevant transport operators.

The Deputy is likely aware that, commencing in 2016, transport investment in all the major cities is guided by the development of metropolitan area transport strategies. Since 2016 transport strategies have been published in respect of the Greater Dublin Area, Galway and the Cork Metropolitan Area, while development of a transport strategy for the Limerick-Shannon Metropolitan Area has commenced and work on the final strategy in respect of the Waterford Metropolitan Area is scheduled to commence this year.

This 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. I would also note that providing this type of long-term investment framework represents international best practice in the area of transport planning.

These transport strategies, once developed, provide the comprehensive strategic backdrop to transport investment in all our cities, including in relation to rail services and infrastructure, and I look forward to working with the National Transport Authority in relation to implementing the various strategies' recommendations.

Driver Licences

203. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of persons that are ordinarily resident here but driving on licences from another country; if he has considered the possibility of converting these licences into Irish licences as an emergency Covid-19 measure to help reduce the waiting list for driver tests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15143/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Driver and Vehicle Computer Services Division (DVCS) of my Department manages the computer records of all vehicles and drivers in the State, referred to collectively as the National Vehicle and Driver File (NVDF). The NVDF does not hold information on licences issued by other countries. EU driving licences are recognised in Ireland for the duration of the validity of the licence. When the licence expires, a person resident in Ireland will be issued with an Irish driving licence on application.

All EU driving licences are exchangeable when a person moves from one Member State to another. In the case of non-EU jurisdictions, we may make bilateral agreements on licence exchange when the relevant authorities in each jurisdiction have studied and compared the two licensing regimes, so that each side can be satisfied that they are compatible and that licences can be exchanged without an adverse impact on road safety on one or other country, due to differing standards. On the Irish side, this task is undertaken by the Road Safety Authority (RSA). As the Deputy will recognise, it is essential that a country with whom we agree to exchange licences have a robust system in place.

In the absence of a bilateral agreement - which means that there is no recognised standard of testing which people have met - we require people to go through the national driver learning process in order to obtain an Irish driving licence.

The Motor Insurance Bureau of Ireland may be able to provide the Deputy with information on the number of persons that are ordinarily resident here but driving on licences from another country, as it is usual to give details of a licence when applying for motor insurance.

Road Projects

204. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of a project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15148/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Climate, Energy and Communications and Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

Noting the above position, I have referred your question to TII for a direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Road Projects

205. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of a project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15149/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Climate, Energy and Communications and Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, the improvement and upgrading of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

Noting the above position, I have referred your question to TII for a direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Road Projects

206. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of a project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15150/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Climate, Energy and Communications and Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, the improvement and upgrading of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

Noting the above position, I have referred your question to TII for a direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Road Projects

207. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of a project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15151/20]

208. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of a project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15152/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 207 and 208 together.

As Minister for Climate, Energy, Communications and Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

Noting the above position, I have referred your question to TII for a direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Road Projects

209. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of a project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15153/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Climate, Energy, Communications and Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the national roads programme. Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

Noting the above position, I have referred your question to TII for a direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Road Traffic Accidents

210. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will address a matter regarding road traffic accidents (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15161/20]

211. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will address a matter regarding collisions and road traffic deaths involving alcohol (details

supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15162/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 210 and 211 together.

The information the Deputy has requested is available on the Road Safety Authority website on the Statistics page under the Road Safety tab (link: www.rsa.ie/RSA/Road-Safety/RSA-Statistics/Collision-Statistics/Provisional-Reviews/). Details of the provisional review of fatal collisions for 2019 and contributory factors for fatal collisions 2008-2012 can be found here.

The road collision database in Ireland is created using a form called a C(T)68 forwarded to the Road Safety Authority (RSA) from An Garda Síochána. The information provided in this form is based on preliminary information collected at the scene of a collision and does not constitute the findings of the final investigation. The RSA issues reports regularly using the data contained in this database as the best available representation of fatal and injury collisions.

The report “Fatal Collisions 2008-2012: Alcohol” is based on an analysis of the completed Garda investigation file where the full circumstances of the collisions are available. Access was granted by An Garda Síochána to the completed Investigation File produced for each collision.

The Deputy will appreciate that detailed technical reviews of fatal deaths on the roads can only take place once any other investigation or inquest has concluded and hence there is necessarily a lag between the occurrence of an incident and the publication of detailed statistics.

Covid-19 Tests

212. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which he is concerned about the risk to the domestic market for the remainder of 2020 posed by entry to the State by residents of other countries or re-entry by Irish residents; his views on whether Covid-19 testing at points of entry would be an effective way of replacing the quarantine requirement presently in place and an effective way of protecting confidence in the domestic market; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15169/20]

213. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the extent to which consideration has been given to Covid-19 testing at points of entry to the State as an effective way of replacing the quarantine requirement presently in place; the specific findings or recommendations associated with such considerations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15170/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 212 and 213 together.

The Government considered the matter of International travel at a meeting on 6 July. The current Department of Health regulations concerning mandatory completion of a passenger location form for arriving passengers and a requirement of 14-day self-isolation are to continue until 20 July when the matter will be reviewed again. The matter of COVID-19 testing at airports is also being kept under review.

Covid-19 Pandemic

214. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will consider exemptions to the two-week return self-quarantine for international travel in cir-

cumstances (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15191/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Government considered the matter of International travel at a meeting on 6 July. The current Department of Health regulations concerning mandatory completion of a passenger location form for arriving passengers and a requirement of 14-day self-isolation are to continue until 20 July when the matter will be reviewed again, including review of the matter of exemptions.

Taxi Licences

215. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if the regulation that all taxis must be less than nine years old on their licence renewal dates will be extended for a person (details supplied). [15206/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The regulation of the small public service vehicle (SPSV) industry, including SPSV licensing, 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.

Sports Funding

216. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the criteria used to determine if a club is deemed to be in an area of disadvantage for the purposes of funding; if and the way in which this can be reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15226/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Sports Capital Programme (SCP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country.

In relation to how applications are assessed, under the most recent rounds of the Programme the full scoring system and assessment manual was published in advance of the assessment of applications commencing. The assessment manual for the latest round (2018) of the Programme is available at the following link:- <https://assets.gov.ie/20010/cbff2e0701b04f38ab-4bec9922c729a0.pdf>.

With regard to the awarding of marks for the level of disadvantage, under the most recent rounds of the SCP, the relevant marks were determined based on the Pobal Deprivation Index for the location provided by the applicant and the scoring was weighted to favour applications from more disadvantaged areas.

Following the finalisation of all grants under the 2018 round of the SCP, a full Review was undertaken. Amongst the areas covered in the Review is how applications were assessed in terms of level of disadvantage. This Review is expected to be finalised shortly and the terms and conditions of the next round of the SCP will be cognisant of any recommendations contained therein.

Dublin Airport Authority

217. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his views on the decision by the Dublin Airport Authority to seek payment from taxi drivers in August 2020 for the full following year for access to Dublin Airport; if he will intervene with the authority in view of the fact that many taxi drivers are still on benefits such as the pandemic unemployment payment due to the fact the business has suffered a catastrophic collapse and many drivers will struggle to pay the full years' fees in advance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15244/20]

221. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of taxi permits issued by the Dublin Airport Authority to taxi drivers in each of the years 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [15265/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 217 and 221 together.

The issues raised are operational matters for daa which has statutory responsibility for the management and operation of Dublin Airport. I have therefore forwarded your question to the Company for direct reply. If the Deputy does not receive a reply within ten working days, please advise my Private Office.

Public Transport

218. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will intervene with Irish Rail and urge it to operate a full Monday to Friday schedule on its DART, commuter and Intercity services in view of the restrictions on passenger capacity and the likely increase in numbers travelling; his views on the proposal of Irish Rail not to operate a full service until September 2020 on many of its services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15245/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding relating to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport.

The issue raised is a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA) in conjunction with Iarnród Éireann and I have therefore referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply.

Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Bus Services

219. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his attention has been drawn to an instance in which a parent and a child with autism who had attended a hospital appointment were prevented from boarding a bus from Limerick to Dublin due to the fact they were only destined for Roscrea, County Tipperary, and not Dublin; if his attention has been drawn to the difficulties that parent has also encountered in getting a seat on a Dublin to Limerick bus at Roscrea; if there is a policy to give preference to passengers travelling the full journey of a bus service; and his plans to give parents of children with special needs priority access to transport services. [15256/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. I am not involved in the day-to-day operational aspects of public transport.

The issue raised is a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA), in conjunction with Bus Éireann, and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my Office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Covid-19 Tests

220. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if all Gaelic games players competing in 2020 will undergo compulsory Covid-19 testing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15258/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I am aware that some sports, both domestically and internationally, have decided to use testing as a means to aid return to sport. This is a decision for the National Governing Bodies (NGBs) concerned to consider. I wish to inform the Deputy that an information circular on testing is currently being prepared for the purposes of educating Ireland's NGBs on what these tests are, the role they can potentially play and also to facilitate NGBs in making an informed decision as to whether they wish to employ testing as a tool. The Expert Advisory Group on the Return to Sport, established by my predecessor and which includes medical personnel from the sports sector, intends to distribute this information circular in the near future.

The question of a Government-funded scheme for COVID-19 testing is a matter for the public health authorities and my colleague the Minister for Health.

The Expert Advisory Group has advised - in line with public health advice - that the basic principles of good hygiene practice, hand washing, cough etiquette and social distancing are the most important tools available for the management of this virus. It is recognised that certain sports inherently have social distancing constraints. A sport stratification has been developed to identify low risk and high risk sports in terms of contact. However, the Expert Advisory Group considers that a key message remains that what is done off the field of play is as important as on the field of play.

The Government is strongly supporting the resumption of sport. A funding package of up to €70 million has been announced to support the sport sector, which has been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The funding package will be administered by Sport Ireland.

Question No. 221 answered with Question No. 217.

Rural Transport Programme

222. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will prioritise the further rolling out of the LIFT rural transport scheme further to its successful piloting in Keel and Castlemaine, County Kerry; if his officials will engage further with LocalLink organisations and relevant stakeholders in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15284/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for

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.

Consumer Rights

223. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if a clear directive will be issued in respect of foreign travel and of moneys paid to airlines should a person not travel due to Covid-19 advice or regulations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15315/20]

246. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will provide clarity for those persons who have booked holidays abroad regarding clear guidelines for travel; and if they will be compensated for choosing to follow current guidelines that would leave them out-of-pocket. [15587/20]

249. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if refunds will be arranged to be provided to persons who have booked foreign travel that has been deemed non-essential in cases in which their holidays are due to commence before 20 July 2020; the advice being provided on this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15631/20]

258. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to ensure that persons who paid for airline travel and in circumstances in which it is necessary to cancel such travel due to Covid-19 restrictions and quarantine requirements will have full refunds of the cost of the tickets; the engagement he has had to date with the airline carriers; if he will ensure that consumers receive fair treatment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15830/20]

270. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the efforts he is taking to ensure airlines refund customers who have followed advice to restrict foreign travel for essential business only and cancelled flights leaving many thousands out of pocket; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16109/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 223, 246, 249, 258 and 270 together.

As the Deputies are aware, current Government advice to people is to avoid all non-essential travel overseas, based on the advices of our public health experts. However, there are no flight restrictions in place in Ireland, and there have not been any at any stage since the Government first responded to the threat from Covid-19. This means that the operation of flights remains a commercial decision for airlines. People can still travel if they consider that it is essential to do so and so long as they comply with self-isolation requirements on their return.

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. 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. That said, I understand that the main Irish airlines are currently allowing customers who are booked to travel over the summer months to move their flights with zero change fee. Where flights are cancelled by the airlines, people are entitled to a full cash refund.

Clearly the existing consumer protections and legal obligations on airlines and the broader travel sector did not envisage the current circumstances of mass cancellations and stringent travel restrictions across the Globe. That has, not surprisingly, put the entire system under immense pressure and it is causing real difficulties for people and businesses. I am mindful that the options put forward by airlines may not be fair or workable for customers in all instances, and it is something that I will be raising with the industry at the first available opportunity. Clearly, if the industry is seeking to secure State financial support to help it through the current period - which is one of the recommendations from the Aviation Taskforce - then a commitment to fairness and clarity on consumer rights will have to be offered in return, at the very least.

Light Rail Projects

224. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the estimated full-year cost of purchasing 15 additional 55 m long Luas trams. [15366/20]

225. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the status of the Luas extension to Finglas, Dublin 11; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15367/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 224 and 225 together.

As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, including the provision of light rail in the Greater Dublin Area.

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.

Sports Funding

226. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the way in which an association (details supplied) will distribute additional funding provided to grass-roots football clubs. [15368/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Deputy will be aware that on 30 January, the then Government approved the allocation of additional funding of €2.9 million per annum to the organisation mentioned, for football development in the period 2020 to 2023. Together with the restoration of Sport Ireland programme funding of €2.9 million, this brings the total funding approved for the organisation to €5.8 million per annum up to 2023.

The organisation has committed to implementing certain priority recommendations on governance reform and Sport Ireland expects to be in a position to restore funding to the organisation when these commitments are verifiably honoured. The funding will be allocated to the organisation by Sport Ireland and the further distribution of the funding to its clubs will be a matter for the organisation itself.

The Deputy will also be aware that an additional funding package of up to €70 million was announced on 19 June to support the sport sector, which has been significantly impacted by

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Covid-19. This includes an amount of up to €40 million to support the three main field sports organisations, i.e. the GAA, the IRFU and the FAI.

The allocation of funding to the organisation mentioned by the Deputy and its affiliated clubs has not yet been determined. This additional funding will be invested through new grant schemes which are currently being developed. It is expected that the precise terms of each of the new grant schemes will be announced by Sport Ireland later this month.

Sport Ireland will announce an open invitation to applications from funded bodies for assistance under the grant schemes.

Sports Funding

227. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if final approval will be given to a grant for a stadium (details supplied) under the large scale sporting infrastructure scheme; if the matter will be given urgent priority in view of the amount of time that the applicant has waited since the application was made and the merits of the project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15371/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The National Sports Policy was published in 2018 and provided for a new Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF). The aim of the fund is to provide Exchequer support for larger sports capital projects where the Exchequer investment is greater than the maximum amount available under the Sports Capital Programme.

The first call for applications under the LSSIF was confined to National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) and Local Authorities. The Football Association of Ireland (FAI) submitted an application for funding the stadium development project referred to by the Deputy. In January of this year, provisional allocations totalling €77.4m for 25 projects under Stream 2 (construction) of the LSSIF were announced. In view of the limited funding available, the project referred to by the Deputy did not score sufficiently highly to warrant a provisional allocation in this first set of allocations.

The evaluation procedures and guidelines for the LSSIF provide that once provisional allocations are announced, the projects being suggested for funding undergo a further process of due diligence. This process includes a further review of projects including economic appraisals and feasibility studies as appropriate to comply with the Public Spending Code and EU State Aid rules.

In view of the fact that the proposed development had received previous government support, it was agreed that the application in question should also be subject to the due diligence process and the question of funding could then be further considered. This process has been advancing in consultation with the FAI. On 7th May, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport wrote to the FAI to confirm that it was satisfied that the multi-criteria analysis was compliant with the Public Spending Code.

The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport subsequently wrote to the FAI on 15th June 2020 seeking further information in respect of the financial projections for the project. A response was received from the FAI on the 1st July and is currently being examined. A decision on any possible funding for the project is expected after this material has been fully reviewed.

Covid-19 Pandemic

228. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if a representative for workers in the tourism industry will be appointed to the tourism recovery task force (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15385/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Tourism Recovery Taskforce was established on 20 May 2020. The purpose of the Taskforce is 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 will report back later this year. It has already submitted an Initial Report to Government on what it sees as priority measures for the survival of the tourism sector.

The Taskforce is made up of an independent chairperson and 13 other members from a broad spectrum of backgrounds including tourism policy, tourism enterprise, international, private and public service. The members were selected on the basis of each person's capacity to bring his/her personal knowledge, skills, experience, competence, capability, strategic leadership and ideas to the work of the group. The individuals appointed will work together for the good of Irish Tourism as a whole.

The Taskforce has already undertaken a widespread stakeholder consultation process whereby all sectors and interested parties could provide constructive inputs and innovative ideas on how this vital sector to our economy can adapt and recover in a meaningful and sustainable way. As I understand it, the Taskforce will continue to engage with stakeholders as it seeks to finalise its work over the coming months.

Questions Nos. 229 and 230 answered with Question No. 152.

Covid-19 Pandemic

231. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to set up a transport forum within his Department to deal with the impact of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15402/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I understand that the focus of the Deputies questions are about the approach for supporting private operators in the public transport sector in relation to the challenges raised by the Covid-19 health emergency.

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 safely and to plan for capacity as demand for public transport services changes along the course of the Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. In this context, the NTA has been engaging directly with both public service obligation (PSO) and commercial transport operators. My Department has also been also engaging directly with commercial bus operators to help inform policy decisions in relation to the public transport sector as we progress through the various phases of the Roadmap. In relation to taxis and hackneys, there has also been direct engagement with the Taxi Advisory Committee who have since been reviewing the situation in relation to the small public service vehicles (SPSV) sector and I expect to consider the output of their work shortly. In connection with all this, my Department has engaged intensively across Government in relation to progressing a wide range of relevant issues in relation to public transport, particularly focussed on safety, capacity, and financial challenges.

From my Department's engagement with their representatives, and indeed from the NTA's

regular engagement with them throughout the crisis, I understand the very difficult business environment that the commercial operators have been facing. Indeed, across Government we are acutely aware that the Covid-19 situation presents huge challenges for many business sectors.

It is critical for the public transport sector to be functioning so that it can carry the passengers that we need to return to work and to other activities as they re-open. Many of these operators provide essential transport services for people who need to get to work and are vital to ensure economic recovery.

For that reason, the Deputies will be pleased to know that on 25 June the Government approved temporary funding supports, in accordance with EU and national legislation, for the licensed bus sector. These supports are aimed at ensuring the continued operation of essential licensed bus services for a period of up to six months. The package will be restricted to operators where a clear public interest justification supports such intervention and will be targeted at compensating the gap between specified costs and the revenues generated on the services. The NTA, as the public transport licensing agency, is responsible for administering funding support through the establishment of contracts between the NTA and the relevant operators.

This is, of course, additional to the wider programme of Government supports for impacted businesses were introduced, including new schemes of wage subsidies, rates waivers, re-start grants, lending facilities, equity injection, and business advisory supports for example. In relation to SPSVs specifically, the NTA has also introduced a range of measures to facilitate their operation, and engaged with the insurance industry also on their behalf. Consideration of measures to be included in the July Stimulus Plan will be taken by Government shortly.

With the commencement of Phase 3 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business on 29 June 2020, changes to the existing public transport social distancing restrictions were agreed, allowing a move from 2 metres social distancing to utilising 50% of the passenger-carrying capacity of bus and rail fleet. This will help to underpin public transport services provided by both public and commercial licensed operators during these unprecedented times, with a view to safeguarding public transport of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business.

In view of all the existing necessary engagements to address the Covid challenges I have no plans, at this time, to establish an additional administrative structure in relation to Covid matters.

Covid-19 Pandemic

232. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the distinct protections, advice and oversight of tourist and non-tourist arrivals from countries deemed to have a safe level of Covid-19 infections to those with an unsafe level; if the effectiveness of the proposed approaches are evaluated by way of either international experience or domestic trials; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15458/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Government considered the matter of international travel at a meeting on 6 July. The current Department of Health regulations concerning mandatory completion of a passenger location form for arriving passengers and a requirement of 14-day self-isolation are to continue until 20 July when the matter will be reviewed again.

Covid-19 Tests

233. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans for Covid-19 testing within sporting clubs. [15470/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The issue of publicly funded COVID-19 testing is a matter for the public health authorities and my colleague the Minister for Health.

The Expert Advisory Group on the Return to Sport, established by my predecessor and which includes medical personnel from the sports sector, has advised - in line with public health advice - that the basic principles of good hygiene practice, hand washing, cough etiquette and social distancing are the most important tools available for the management of this virus. It is recognised that certain sports inherently have social distancing constraints. A sport stratification has been developed to identify low risk and high risk sports in terms of contact. However, the Expert Advisory Group considers that a key message remains that what is done off the field of play is as important as on the field of play.

I am aware that some sports, both domestically and internationally, are using testing as a means to aid return to sport. I wish to inform the Deputy that for the purposes of educating Ireland's National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) on what these tests are, the role they can potentially play and also to facilitate NGBs in making an informed decision as to whether they wish to employ testing as a tool, the Expert Advisory Group is in the process of completing an information circular for NGBs. It is planned to distribute this information circular in the near future.

The Government is strongly supporting the resumption of sport. A funding package of up to €70 million has been announced to support the sport sector, which has been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The funding package will be administered by Sport Ireland.

Covid-19 Pandemic

234. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will advise travel agents that are liable for refunding clients who have booked holidays but cannot travel due to public health advice in circumstances in which the airline and hoteliers will not refund, in view of the fact that flights are running and the agent will be out of pocket, jeopardising its business. [15472/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Deputy raises an important issue for Irish licensed travel agents and tour operators, many of which are small, local high street businesses. Under the EU Package Travel Directive, travel agents and tour operators are required to provide their customers with a full cash refund when a holiday is cancelled due to exceptional circumstances, which of course Covid is. However, the travel agents and tour operators are having difficulties securing refunds themselves from their suppliers to pass onto their customers, and indeed where flights take place - irrespective whether a travel agent's customer has cancelled - the airlines are not obligated to provide a refund at all. This is causing considerable financial strain in the sector.

The State is providing financial backing for a Refund Credit Note scheme, under which travel agents and tour operators can issue credit notes to their customers instead of cash - if the customer agrees - and the financial value of that credit note is guaranteed by the State. This is a measure designed to give assurance to consumers about the safety of accepting a credit note, and help the industry alleviate the cash flow drain it is experiencing. The challenge is to ensure that consumer rights are protected and at the same time that viable business and their workers

are kept going.

My Department is maintaining an open engagement with the industry body, the Irish Travel Agents Association, with a view to seeing what else can be done to support the businesses and protect the jobs.

Driver Test

235. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the measures being taken to ensure the driver theory test backlog caused by Covid-19 is cleared quickly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15492/20]

236. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when driver tests for cars will resume; the measures being put in place to deal with the backlog of those waiting for tests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15496/20]

251. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when driver tests will resume in Clonmel, County Tipperary; the reason for the delay in resuming tests at the test centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15661/20]

252. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if theory tests have resumed in Clonmel, County Tipperary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15662/20]

257. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to deal with the backlog of driver test appointments at the Finglas test centre. [15829/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 235, 236, 251, 252 and 257 together.

The RSA has been 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 Safely Protocol as agreed by employer and trade union representatives.

The Driver Theory Test Service resumed as of 8 June, with centres opening on a gradual basis. The resumption is dependent on strict protocols being in place for staff and test candidates in order to comply with public health guidelines. People wishing to take the theory test should check the service through <https://theorytest.ie/>, where they can book a test and learn about the protocols which will apply during their visit to the centre.

On 29 June, driving tests resumed on a gradual basis for trucks, buses and motorcycles. Fourteen driving test centres reopened initially, but as the number of tests and categories of vehicles being tested increases in the coming weeks, the remaining test centres will reopen. Driving tests for cars, vans and minibuses will resume this week on a phased basis with tests for essential workers being prioritised by the RSA in the first instance. There are over 52 driving test centres and each centre must be risk assessed before it is reopened. The RSA will update its website, rsa.ie to advise on each centre as it re-opens.

Inevitably, there is a backlog of both theory tests and driving tests due to Covid 19 and the suspension of services. Due to the social distancing requirements, normal daily capacity will be considerably reduced. This will mean that customers will experience longer waiting times than was the case before the service was suspended and the public's patience and understanding in

this regard is requested.

The RSA have assured my Department it is working hard to deal with this backlog – the Driver Theory Test provider for example will be opening on additional days including Saturdays, (at some centres) and extended hours will also be provided to allow additional capacity for appointments.

Given that there will be longer waiting times on the resumption of the driver testing service, it is planned that there will be a prioritisation of appointments. After essential workers, those whose appointments were cancelled by the RSA due to the Covid-19 situation will have first priority. Priority then will be given in order of application date. This approach for prioritising customers will be kept under review as the RSA moves through the service resumption.

All of the resumed services are now subject to appropriate public health protocols. Services must be booked in advance, and people should follow the required protocols for the sake of their own health and that of others. Further information is available at www.rsa.ie.

The safety of the public is of paramount importance at this time.

Sports Funding

237. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the funding allocated in June 2020 to sporting bodies; the amount received by each sporting body or sporting governing body; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15503/20]

238. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if the funding allocated for sports in June 2020 will involve a grant scheme for individual sports clubs in financial difficulty due to Covid-19. [15504/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 237 and 238 together.

A funding package of up to €70 million was announced on Friday 19th June to support the sport sector, which has been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The funding package will be administered by Sport Ireland, which is the statutory body with responsibility for the development of sport.

This funding package includes;

- Funding of up to €40m for the three main field sports organisations – the FAI, the GAA and the IRFU.

- a Resilience Fund of up to €10m to support the National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs),

- a Sports Club Resilience Fund of up to €15m to support clubs, and

- a Sports Restart and Renewal Fund of up to €5m.

The allocation of this funding to individual NGBs or clubs has not yet been determined. The funding will be invested through new grant schemes which are currently being developed. It is expected that the precise terms of each of the new grant schemes will be announced by Sport Ireland later this month and Sport Ireland will announce an open invitation to applications from funded bodies for assistance under the grant schemes.

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I have referred the Deputy's question to Sport Ireland in relation to any funding allocated to sporting organisations in June under its existing funding schemes. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a reply is not received within 10 days.

Tourism Funding

239. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the funding allocation made to Tourism Ireland in each of the years 2017 to 2019, inclusive; and the expected spend for 2020. [15508/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Tourism Ireland is funded through the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland. Tourism Ireland's funding from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in each of the years from 2017 to 2020 inclusive, is set out in the table hereunder.

Year	Total Funding
2017	€41,307,000
2018	€47,693,000
2019	€58,524,000
2020	€53,701,000

It should be noted that the amounts set out for 2017-2019 are outturn amounts and, for 2018 and 2019, include supplementary funding provided to the agency. The amount set out for 2020 is the budgetary allocation for Tourism Ireland this year.

Tourism Funding

240. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the funding allocation made to Fáilte Ireland in each of the years 2017 to 2019, inclusive; and the expected spend for 2020. [15509/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Details of the annual funding allocation provided by my Department to Fáilte Ireland are available in the annual Revised Estimates Volume (REV) published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and is available on that Department's website. The subheads of relevance to Fáilte Ireland are E3, E6 and E5 (shared with Tourism Ireland) and further detail is available in the Agency Statement for Fáilte Ireland under Vote 31.

Tourism Funding

241. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the funding allocation made to local authorities for tourism purposes in each of the years 2017 to 2019, inclusive; and the expected spend for 2020. [15510/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department does not provide funding for tourism purposes to local authorities other than for the development of greenways. Funding provided to local authorities for development of greenways in the relevant period was as follows: 2017 €5,938,460; 2018 €3,249,429; 2019 €4,635,944. In 2020 Revised Estimates Volume, including the amount carried over from 2019, the total amount al-

located for expenditure on greenways is €27,000,000, the bulk of which is expected to be spent through local authorities.

I have referred the Deputy's question to Fáilte Ireland to provide further detail regarding funding provided to local authorities by the tourism agency. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Driver Test

242. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if the requirement for US citizens and returning Irish emigrants to sit a theory test and take driver lessons and a driver test within one year of living here will be extended by four months due to the Covid-19 restrictions on driver tests and lessons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15514/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): It is possible to drive in Ireland on a foreign licence for up to a year under the Geneva Convention, but this only applies to visitors. A foreign licence holder who is resident in Ireland can exchange their licence for an Irish licence if there is a licence exchange agreement in place with the relevant country. Such a licence can be exchanged within one year of the expiry of the licence. This one year period is for exchange purposes only. Ireland does not have a licence exchange agreement with the US. It is illegal to drive in Ireland without a valid licence.

Ireland cannot extend the validity of a driving licence issued by another licensing authority. The validity of a driving licence issued by another EU Member State, that has been extended by that Member State due to the Covid-19 pandemic, will be recognised in Ireland.

Driver Test

243. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will consider introducing a reciprocal agreement with the United States of America on driver licences in view of the fact that the current requirements place an undue burden on Americans and returning Irish emigrants who are actively recruited to invest and work here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15515/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Irish driver licensing law operates within a framework of EU law. It is important to remember that driver licensing law exists to ensure that people licensed to drive on our roads meet high standards of safety. The standards for testing drivers are set at EU level.

As such, all EU driving licences are exchangeable when a person moves from one Member State to another. In the case of non-EU jurisdictions, we may make bilateral agreements on licence exchange when the relevant authorities in each jurisdiction have studied and compared the two licensing regimes, so that each side can be satisfied that they are compatible and that licences can be exchanged without an adverse impact on road safety on one or other country, due to differing standards. On the Irish side, this task is undertaken by the Road Safety Authority (RSA). As the Deputy will recognise, it is essential that a country with whom we agree to exchange licences has a robust system in place. On the Irish side, this task is undertaken by the Road Safety Authority (RSA).

The RSA has previously explored reaching an agreement on exchange with the USA. How-

ever, US driver licensing operates at State rather than federal level, meaning that there are 50 licensing systems with widely varying standards. Agreement with any one State would mean taking into account the exchange relations between that State and the other 49 States. In that regard, it is important to note that not only do systems and standards vary across states, but road safety records vary accordingly and indeed in many cases are more comparable to developing countries than, for example, other EU member states. The RSA therefore determined that agreement would not be possible, without undermining the safety of road users in Ireland and indeed across the EU.

When people come to Ireland with a non-exchange licence, we have no option but to require them to go through the process of obtaining an Irish licence. This is a matter of public safety. While many may have a safe driving record, we have no way of measuring this.

At present, people with a full but non-exchange licence go through the normal driver learning process, but they can avail of the shorter Essential Driver Training of 6 lessons instead of the usual 12. Some lessons would be useful in helping people to adjust to Irish driving rules and conditions. They also do not have to wait the minimum of 6 months before taking a driving test.

Public Transport

244. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if even headway profiles are used in bus transport services here; his views on whether this is the best approach in the public transport system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15516/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport.

The issue raised is a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA) 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.

Rail Network

245. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will reinstate pre-7 a.m. services from Monasterevin train station; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15574/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport.

The issue raised is an operational matter for Iarnród Éireann, in conjunction with the National Transport Authority, and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply.

Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Question No. 246 answered with Question No. 223.

Covid-19 Pandemic

247. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if he will review the concerns of a person (details supplied) regarding asymptomatic cases; if he will address the concerns; if he will review the proposals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15593/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The issue publicly funded COVID-19 testing is a matter for the public health authorities and my colleague the Minister for Health.

The Expert Advisory Group on the Return to Sport, established by my predecessor and which includes medical personnel, has advised - in line with public health advice - that the basic principles of good hygiene practice, hand washing, cough etiquette and social distancing are the most important tools available for the management of this virus.

I am aware that some sports, both domestically and internationally, are using testing as a means to aid return to sport. I wish to inform the Deputy that for the purposes of educating Ireland's National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) on what these tests are, the role they can potentially play and also to facilitate NGBs in making an informed decision as to whether they wish to employ testing as a tool, the Expert Advisory Group is in the process of completing an information circular for NGBs. It is planned to distribute this information circular in the near future.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

248. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if his attention has been drawn to the fact that many hoteliers that have not met the criteria for the restart grant find themselves in a situation in which they have no access to supports other than Covid-19-related loan schemes, which would put them into more debt; his plans to address this problem that affects many in the tourism industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15607/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Programme for Government contains a commitment that the Government will publish a series of immediate actions to support the economy - the "July Stimulus". In this context the Government will, among other things, consider further additional measures that may be needed to support the tourism and hospitality sector.

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 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.

My predecessor also established the Tourism Recovery Taskforce on 20th May 2020 to prepare a Tourism Recovery Plan. This 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 Taskforce has submitted an initial report.

Question No. 249 answered with Question No. 223.

Airport Development Projects

250. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if funding previously committed to for extending the runway at Waterford Airport has been released; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15644/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy may be aware, in June 2019, the Government gave approval, in principle, to contributing €5 million in Exchequer funding towards a €12 million runway extension project at Waterford Airport.

The model of funding put forward by Waterford Airport in respect of this project was new - private and local authority interests have committed to investing the balance of the cost, which is estimated to be €7 million. As a result, certain conditions were attached to the Government's support. One condition specified that the Exchequer contribution would only be made when all of the upgrade works are completed and the runway is confirmed to be ready for service by the Irish Aviation Authority.

As the project has not been completed to date, no funding has been released to the Airport.

Questions Nos. 251 and 252 answered with Question No. 235.

Driver Test

253. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if those living abroad with Irish driver licences who cannot travel home to renew same can extend their licence until all travel restrictions are lifted; the provisions available to persons who cannot get an appointment to renew their licence prior to the expiry date due to the unavailability of appointment slots and in cases in which the person does not hold a public services card and therefore cannot apply online; if persons who cannot get an appointment prior to their expiry date will have their licence extended until appointments become available (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15663/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): An applicant for a driving licence must have their normal residence in the State.

An Irish driving licence can be renewed up to 10 years after the expiry date of the licence.

National Car Test

254. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if rain shelters will be placed outside NCT centres (details supplied) to ensure that those being made to wait outside are sheltered from the elements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15693/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): 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 and oversight of periodic roadworthiness testing in the State. Accordingly, I have forwarded your query to the RSA as it relates to an operational matter.

I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if he has not received a response within 10 days.

Transport Policy

255. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to put hybrid cars back on the plan for limited companies as opposed to just electric vehicles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15727/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): In order to accelerate the up-take by drivers of zero- and low-emitting vehicles, a range of incentives is available to individuals and companies to reduce the cost of their purchase and running. Incentives are targeted at different purchaser types and in respect of different vehicle types, and several of the incentives schemes are designed to specifically give more encouragement for up-take of vehicles that have the better carbon impact.

It is not clear from the question which precise incentive the Deputy is asking about. I expect that the Deputy’s question may relate incentives in the tax area - the Vehicle Registration Tax incentive or the special Benefit-in-Kind rate - in which case he should refer the question to my colleague the Minister for Finance. If he is enquiring about the EV purchase grant administered by the SEAI, further information is available from the Department of Climate Action, Communications Networks and the Environment or the SEAI directly.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

256. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if a stimulus package or other forms of support for the taxi sector are being considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15780/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I recognise that from the onset of the COVID-19 emergency and the introduction of restrictions as part of the necessary public health response, passenger demand for taxis and other small public service vehicle (SPSV) services fell considerably and many operators stopped working.

In recognition of the challenges facing businesses, the Government put in place a range of measures to assist businesses during the current COVID-19 pandemic, including the COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme, the COVID-19 Restart Grant, and a waiver of commercial rates. Self-employed owner operators of SPSVs may also avail of the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

Over the past few months, the National Transport Authority (NTA), which is the body under the aegis of my Department with responsibility for regulating the SPSV sector, has undertaken a number of measures to assist operators in the industry including waivers, facilitating temporary licence suspensions, interaction with the insurance industry, and providing guidance to operators on cleaning and other ways to reduce the risk of spreading Covid-19.

The focus now is on assisting those who have stopped working to get back to work as the economy reopens and passenger demand for SPSVs returns. My Department is in regular contact with the NTA to monitor the impact that the reopening of the economy in line with the Government’s Roadmap to Reopening Society and Business is having on demand for SPSV services and to ensure that SPSV operators who have temporarily stopped working are well placed to return to work.

Question No. 257 answered with Question No. 235.

Taxi Regulations

259. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if regulations will be amended to allow small public service vehicles, SPSVs, taxis and hackneys to pass the required SPSV suitability tests in view of the fact that Covid-19 guidelines provide for Perspex screens between drivers of such vehicles and their passengers in order to prevent their insurance being voided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15879/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The National Transport Authority (NTA), as the statutory regulator for the SPSV sector under the Taxi Regulation Act 2013, has published information for the SPSV industry which includes guidelines in relation to COVID-19. This information is available on the NTA's website.

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.

Railway Stations

260. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the position regarding the reopening of the Killucan, County Westmeath train station; if a decision has been made as to when the station will reopen; and the engagement he has had with a group (details supplied) since becoming Minister. [15883/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I understand a reply issued in recent days from my Private Office in reply to correspondence received from the Group referred to in the Deputy's question..

As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding of public transport. The operation, maintenance and renewal of the rail network and stations on the network including the former station referred to, is a matter for Iarnród Éireann in the first instance. I am not aware of any decision in relation to the reopening of the station at Killucan.

In view of Iarnród Éireann's responsibility in this matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Rural Transport Services

261. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if an additional bus stop for the Wicklow to Glendalough Local Link bus route will be put in place to facilitate residents of a direct provision centre (details supplied) in view of the fact that no other public transport exists in the area leading to increased isolation for those residing in the centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15912/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): 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

262. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the reason the National Driver Licence Service did not extend the validity of driver licences beyond 30 June 2020; if the matter will be reviewed for those drivers who fall outside the criteria for online renewal and cannot obtain a timely appointment such as a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15929/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The validity of driving licences and learner permits that expired between March and June was extended for 4 months from date of expiry. People with driving licences with an original expiry date in March, which was extended to July and are now due for renewal, and they can renew their licence at a National Driver Licence Service (NDLS) centre.

The NDLS resumed services on Monday 8 June 2020 on a gradual basis with centres reopening on a phased basis countrywide. Part-time NDLS offices in Belmullet and Clifden are expected to reopen in the coming weeks.

Due to public health measures in place to tackle the spread of the Covid-19, walk-in appointments are no longer available. While services are returning to normal, there will be some delays in acquiring appointments. I understand the individual in question has an appointment for next week. The RSA continues to work on expanding the online facility to accommodate all driving licence and learner permit application types.

Learner permits were further extended for an additional 4 months. This extension was given to allow the NDLS to give priority to applications for driving licence renewals.

National Transport Authority

263. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the way in which the €11.2 million allocated to National Transport Authority under the accessibility retrofit programme was spent in each of the years 2018 and 2019. [15931/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, including the Accessibility Retrofit Programme.

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.

14 July 2020

Shannon Airport Facilities

264. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if an aircraft (details supplied) was given approval to land and refuel at Shannon Airport on 1 July 2020; if the aircraft was approved to transport weapons, munitions or other military materials through Shannon Airport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15961/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Chicago Convention is the main treaty that governs international civil aviation. Article 5 of the Convention makes provision for overflights and stops for non-traffic purposes, including for refuelling, for aircraft from Contracting States engaged in non-scheduled flights. Both Ireland and the United States are party to this Convention. This provision is implemented in Irish law in the Air Services Authorisation Order, 1993. A stop for non-traffic purposes was authorised for the aircraft concerned, pursuant to Article 3 of the Air Services Authorisation Order, 1993.

There was no application made for exemption to carry munitions under the Air Navigation (Carriage of Munitions of War, Weapons and Dangerous Goods) Order, 1973.

Question No. 265 answered with Question No. 141.

Covid-19 Tests

266. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport his plans to provide Covid-19 testing for GAA players to prevent outbreaks in the community; if this could be seen as urgent in view of the fact that social distancing in the sport is deemed impossible; and if financial support will be made available to fund such a strategy. [16015/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The issue of publicly-funded COVID-19 testing is a matter for the public health authorities and my colleague the Minister for Health.

The Expert Advisory Group on the Return to Sport, established by my predecessor and which includes medical personnel from the sports sector, has advised - in line with public health advice - that the basic principles of good hygiene practice, hand washing, cough etiquette and social distancing are the most important tools available for the management of this virus. It is recognised that certain sports inherently have social distancing constraints. A sport stratification has been developed to identify low risk and high risk sports in terms of contact. However, the Expert Advisory Group considers that a key message remains that what is done off the field of play is as important as on the field of play.

I am aware that some sports, both domestically and internationally, are using testing as a means to aid return to sport. I wish to inform the Deputy that for the purposes of educating Ireland's National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) on what these tests are, the role they can potentially play and also to facilitate NGBs in making an informed decision as to whether they wish to employ testing as a tool, the Expert Advisory Group is in the process of completing an information circular for NGBs. It is planned to distribute this information circular in the near future.

The Government is strongly supporting the resumption of sport. A funding package of up to €70 million has been announced to support the sport sector, which has been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The funding package will be administered by Sport Ireland.

Rail Network

267. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport when the train timetable for Carlow will return to a normal schedule; if services ceased during Covid-19 will be reinstated (details supplied). [16022/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport.

The issue raised is an operational matter for Iarnród Éireann, in conjunction with the National Transport Authority, and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply.

Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic

268. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport further to Parliamentary Question No. 114 of 7 July 2020, if the advice since February 2020 constitutes advice not to travel; the body a person can complain to regarding breaches of this directive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16028/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I understand the Deputy's follow up question to the Parliamentary Question of 7 July to be related to the EU Package Travel Directive and consumer's rights to cancellation and refunds in light of Government travel restrictions.

The Government's travel restrictions mean that people can cancel a package holiday booked through an Irish licensed travel agent or tour operator and receive a full refund, as provided for under EU Directive 2302. Advice to this effect is available at the following web address: www.gov.ie/en/publication/40f0d7-guidance-on-the-right-of-travellers-to-terminate-package-travel-cont/. People can also agree to a Refund Credit Note, instead of cash, which is Government-backed and which can be used to rebook a cancelled holiday at a later stage or can be redeemed for cash in 9 months.

In terms of a complaints process, the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission is the relevant government agency in respect of Directive 2302. If customers are having problems receiving their refunds from travel agents/tour operators they have recourse to escalate their complaint at www.ccpc.ie or on the helpline 01 402 5555.

Sports Facilities

269. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport if the relevant meetings with his officials will be organised to progress a proposal (details supplied) in relation to the provision of an athletics track and municipal stadium which is much needed in the east County Meath area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16033/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Sports Capital Programme (SCP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout

the country. Schools may apply for funding so long as they do so with a sports club or organisation.

The most recent (2018) round of the SCP attracted a record 2,337 applications. Allocations were announced in January, May and November of last year with a total of over €56 million awarded to 1,648 different projects.

Following the finalisation of all applications, a full Review of the 2018 round of the SCP was undertaken. This Review is currently under consideration and I understand that a decision on the timing of a new round of the SCP will be taken after it is finalised.

Furthermore, the National Sports Policy was published in 2018 and provided for a new Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF). The aim of the fund is to provide Exchequer support for larger sports capital projects where the Exchequer investment is greater than the maximum amount available under the Sports Capital Programme. The first call for applications under the LSSIF was confined to National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) and Local Authorities and the first grants under the new scheme were announced in January of this year.

In both the SCP and the LSSIF, higher scores are awarded to applicants showing that the proposed facilities will be shared with other users. In relation to the proposed project referred to by the Deputy it will be open to project sponsors to consider applying for assistance under either the next round of the SCP or the LSSIF as appropriate.

Question No. 270 answered with Question No. 223.

Question No. 271 answered with Question No. 152.

Question No. 272 answered with Question No. 166.

Road Projects

273. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the position regarding a road project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16121/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Climate, Energy, Communications, Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and securing exchequer funding in relation to the National Roads Programme.

Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 and in line with the current National Development Plan (NDP), the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. This is also subject to the Public Spending Code Guidelines and the necessary statutory approvals.

In this context, TII is best placed to advise you regarding the position of this project.

Noting the above, I have referred your question to TII for a direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Public Inquiries

274. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport the number of tribunals, public investigations and commissions of investigations in process; the length

of time each has been under way; when each will conclude; the cost to date of each; and the estimated cost of each at completion. [16140/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The information requested is currently being collated by my officials and will be forwarded to the Deputy within 10 working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

275. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Finance if seasonal tourism businesses will be able to avail of the temporary wage subsidy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15202/20]

280. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Finance if the temporary wage subsidy scheme will be expanded to include seasonal restaurants and other businesses open during summer months when tourism is at its peak; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15918/20]

281. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Finance the position regarding seasonal employers who have requested inclusion in the temporary wage subsidy scheme but who have been denied due to the fact their businesses were not operational by the cut-off date of 29 February 2020. [15998/20]

289. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Finance if he will extend the Covid-19 payments beyond August 2020. [15065/20]

294. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if he will expand the temporary wage subsidy scheme to include seasonal workers who had not returned to work by the deadline in March 2020 and who face little prospect of employment for the remainder of 2020 unless covered by the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15155/20]

307. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Finance the reason the temporary wage subsidy scheme cannot be amended to allow those seasonal businesses that were not yet fully operational on 29 February 2020, but which would have been fully operational since March or April 2020, to avail of the scheme in order that they can return to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15408/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 275, 280, 281, 289, 294 and 307 together.

The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) was introduced in March and was specifically designed to support firm viability and preserve the relationship between the employer and employee insofar as is possible through the lockdown period, in circumstances where the employer's business had been negatively impacted by COVID-19.

The scheme was developed in a short period of time, having regard to the overarching urgent Government objective of getting assistance to employers and employees quickly.

Since it was introduced, over 50,000 firms have availed of the scheme (which is almost a third of all employers from 2019). Over 500,000 jobs have been directly supported over the period and many more indirectly. This is considerable coverage and it is noted that the value of payments made to date is over €2 billion.

As the public health restrictions are eased, the challenge for the economy and enterprises is

evolving. Having regard to the novel circumstances surrounding the re-opening of the economy as well as the need to avoid the risk of forcing otherwise viable firms to close, in July it was announced that the TWSS will remain until the end of August. Work is currently ongoing around how best to support employers into the more medium term. The position of various sectors, including the businesses and workers mentioned by the Deputies, will be taken into account in this process. As stated in the Programme for Government, it is planned that the July Jobs Initiative will set out a pathway for the future of the TWSS.

Tax Code

276. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the ring-fencing of the sugar tax to tackle obesity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15480/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Hypothecation is not a feature of the Irish tax system in general. The Department of Finance is opposed to the hypothecation of Exchequer receipts as it reduces the flexibility of the Government to prioritise and allocate funds as necessary at a particular time. This constrains expenditure decisions and can distort the allocation of resources resulting in reduced value for money and sub-optimal outcomes.

An annual budget is allocated to the Department of Health as part of the estimates process and that is assigned according to the needs within that Department, including in relation to measures to tackle the problem of obesity.

Accordingly, I do not intend to hypothecate sugar-sweetened drinks tax receipts.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

277. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Finance his plans in relation to travel management companies and other business travel companies and the extension of the temporary wage subsidy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15512/20]

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) and is being extended until the end of August.

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.

The Government decided on 5 June 2020 to extend the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) until the end of August. The intention is to continue to monitor the scheme closely in the coming period. I expect that decisions will be taken at an appropriate time on next steps for the TWSS beyond end-August. In this regard, I acknowledge that certain sectors will face particular challenges into the future as we re-open our economy, and this is one of many factors that will inform such future decisions.

In relation to other direct support measures, I would draw the Deputy's attention to a recent publication by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, which outlines the key

financial supports and resources that are being made available to help all businesses and sectors impacted by Covid-19. This publication is available at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/publication/c644c0-supports-for-businesses-impacted-by-covid-19/.

Help-To-Buy Scheme

278. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to amend the help-to-buy scheme for persons who build their own home in order that the reckonable limits apply to the cost of the home rather than the loan to value, LTV, rate in view of the fact that the current conditions discriminate against rural dwellers who build on their own land; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15700/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The purpose of the Help to Buy incentive is to help first-time buyers fund their first home, which may be purchased from a builder or self-built. The incentive applies for the period from 19 July 2016 to 31 December 2021 (having recently been extended by a further two year period in Finance Act 2019). The legislative provisions for the Help to Buy incentive are set out in Section 477C of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997.

Currently, in order to avail of the Help To Buy incentive, the loan-to-value ratio (LTV) for a property must be 70% or more. In the case of a self build residence, the lender will apply a valuation using the Central Bank macro prudential mortgage rules, which consists of the aggregate of the market value of the land and the estimated costs of construction.

The scheme as announced in Budget 2017 was limited to persons who had mortgages with a minimum LTV of 80%. However, Central Bank data indicated that a sizeable number of first-time buyers take out a mortgage with a LTV of less than 80%. It was decided to amend the scheme in the Finance Bill to set the minimum LTV at 70% so as to ensure that first-time buyers did not feel compelled to borrow larger amounts than they would have otherwise in order to qualify for the scheme.

I do not believe that it would be fair or equitable to allow for different eligibility criteria with regard to loan-to-value ratios in respect of self-build properties *vis a vis* that which applies to all other new build homes. As such, there are no plans to amend the scheme in the manner that has been proposed by the Deputy.

Banking Sector

279. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Finance if banks have continued to accrue interest on accounts availing of the Covid-19 repayment holiday period without an obligation to do so; the measures he plans to take to motivate and incentivise banks to reimburse such interest to customers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15880/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Members of the Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland (BPFi) introduced the payment break for their customers on 18 March last to provide relief for people whose income had been affected by the Covid-19 crisis. The scheme was introduced in advance of the EBA guidelines of 2 April 2020.

The guidelines stated the following in paragraph 24:

“The moratorium changes only the schedule of payments. This condition is consistent with the objective of the moratorium to address the systemic short-term liquidity shortages. In order

to achieve this objective, the moratoria suspend, postpone or reduce the payments (principal, interest or both) within a limited period of time. This clearly affects the whole schedule of payment and may lead to increased payments after the period of the moratorium or an extended duration of the loan. However, the moratorium should not affect other conditions of the loan, in particular the interest rate, unless such change only serves for compensation to avoid losses which an institution otherwise would have due to the delayed payment schedule under the moratorium, which would allow the impact on the net present value to be neutralised.”

Banks across Europe interpreted the above paragraph in different ways with the results that different schemes were introduced. Some countries provided for the accrual and capitalisation of the interest. Others provided for the non-accrual of interest and a number of countries provided for accrual of the interest but not its capitalisation. As the Deputy is aware, the payment break introduced by the BPFİ does provide for the accrual of interest.

Subsequently, in its letter to Deputy Doherty on 22 June last, the Central Bank stated that the EBA was expected to provide further clarity on the specific issue of interest accrual and it outlined that both net present value (NPV) neutral and NPV negative solutions are possible. The Central Bank also informed Deputy Doherty that the scheme introduced by the BPFİ is acceptable within the context of the EBA guidelines.

In its implementation report published on 7 July, the EBA stated that the report “provides clarification on questions raised in the context of the EBA’s monitoring of the implementation of Covid-19 policies”.

A key clarification is that:

“ There may be a decline in the NPV if the obligor makes use of the moratorium and postpones one or several payments and no interest is charged for the time covered by the moratorium. Alternatively, the moratorium may be NPV-neutral (i.e. no change in the NPV) if subsequently at least one of the instalments is adjusted upwards or added.”

Finally, the Deputy should note that the Central Bank instructed lenders that customers applying for a payment break must be fully informed about the implications. This means that lenders should outline if the repayment term of the mortgage will be extended due to the payment break, if monthly payments will increase following the resumption of the mortgage repayments, if interest will continue to accrue during the payment break and the implications this will have for the total cost of the credit, and any other significant matter for the customer when availing of a Covid-19 payment break. This was done to ensure that borrowers could make fully informed decisions about whether or not to proceed with a payment break.

Questions Nos. 280 and 281 answered with Question No. 275.

Mortgage Lending

282. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Finance the actions he has taken or proposes to take regarding persons who have been refused the drawdown of mortgages by the pillar banks as a result of being in receipt of the Covid-19 payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14683/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As you will be aware both officials and myself have engaged and will continue to engage extensively with the Banking and Payments Federation (BPFİ) and the banks directly in relation to supports for personal and business customers affected by the COVID-19 crisis. 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.

The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme is one of the main tools with which we are protecting the income of employees who otherwise would not be working. However, whilst I acknowledge the seriousness of the issue you have raised and its impact on those affected, what I cannot do is mandate how temporary payments received under the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme are treated in lending sustainability evaluations by regulators and lenders.

As Minister for Finance I cannot mandate or overrule the internal risk assessment processes in any bank, even one in which the State has a shareholding. Decisions in this regard are the sole responsibility of the board and management of the banks which must be run on an independent and commercial basis. The independence of 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.

Furthermore the banking crisis we faced over ten years ago was fuelled by unsustainable lending. There are now thankfully far firmer regulatory controls and restrictions on lenders. Speaking on this particular issue, on 7 May the Governor of the Central Bank publicly noted that if an individual borrower's circumstances have changed such that doubt is cast over the sustainability of potential borrowing, it is in the best interests of the borrower and the bank if the situation is reviewed.

The European Union (Consumer Mortgage Credit Agreements) Regulations 2016 (CMCAR) apply here. These mandate that before concluding a mortgage credit agreement, a lender must make a thorough assessment of the consumer's creditworthiness. That assessment must take appropriate account of factors relevant to verifying the prospect of the consumer being able to meet his or her obligations under the credit agreement. The CMCAR also 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.

This overall regulatory framework means a decision to grant or refuse an individual application for mortgage credit is a commercial decision to be made by the regulated entity. Where a formal loan offer is made by a lender, the loan offer may contain a condition that may allow the lender to 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 loan offer is also a commercial decision for the lender.

These overlapping and complimentary regulations are designed to protect consumers, prevent risky unsustainable lending, protect the integrity of the financial system and preserve competition in the market.

Value Added Tax

283. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance if the VAT rate on sun cream (details supplied) will be removed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14713/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that the VAT rating of goods and services is subject to the requirements of EU VAT law with which Irish VAT law must comply. The EU VAT Directive (Council Directive 2006/112/EC) generally provides that supplies of goods and services be chargeable to VAT at the standard rate but that lower rates are permitted in very limited circumstances. There is no scope for a reduction in the rate of VAT on sun protective creams that would be in compliance with the EU VAT Directive.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

284. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Finance if a matter relating to the temporary wage subsidy scheme (details supplied) will be investigated with the Revenue Commissioners; if contact will be made with the company in order to resolve the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14727/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is an emergency measure to deal with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy. It builds on data returned to Revenue through the PAYE real-time system and as such is a fully automated solution. The automated solution, which was developed in a very short timeframe in response to the pandemic, is designed around the dates specified in the legislation. These timelines require that employees were on the payroll at 29 February 2020 and that employers had fulfilled their PAYE reporting obligations for February 2020 before 15 March 2020. The 15 March deadline was subsequently revised to before 1 April 2020 by Revenue under its care and management provisions. These requirements are critical safeguards against abuse and exploitation of the scheme.

Revenue has advised me that the business in question is unable to access the TWSS because it did not file its January, February and March payroll submissions until 24 June, which was outside of the concessionary April deadline. Consequently, the TWSS system, which operates around the legislative dates, cannot calculate the 'average net weekly pay' (ARNWP) amount for the relevant employees, which is the key requirement on which the subsidy payments are based. It is not possible for Revenue to design a solution that facilitate access to the TWSS where statutory filing requirements are not adhered to.

Ministerial Responsibilities

285. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Finance if he will provide a copy of the departmental briefings received by him and each Minister of State at his Department on taking up their roles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14803/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to advise the Deputy that the briefing document provided by my Department to me and to the Minister of State at my Department with responsibility for Financial Services, Credit Unions and Insurance following our appointment will be published in the coming weeks. The published version will have regard to the relevant provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2014.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

286. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Finance further to Parliamentary Question No. 63 of 30 June 2020, the way in which he can reconcile the fact that dividing an annual salary paid monthly by 52 results in a higher number than if it is calculated in accordance with the guidance for average revenue net weekly pay, ANRWP; and if a review will be conducted of payments made through the temporary wage subsidy scheme to ensure that no underpayments occurred. [14813/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As previously advised to the Deputy in Parliamentary Question Nos. 63 of 30 June 2020 and 168 of 7 July 2020, under the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) the amount of subsidy payable to eligible employees is based on their ‘average revenue net weekly pay’ (ARNWP) for January and February 2020, as returned by the employer to Revenue through the real-time PAYE system.

The use of January and February 2020 payroll as the base-period for calculating the employee ARNWP was confirmed by me in my letter of 16 April 2020 to Revenue, which also sets out my determinations of the amount of wage subsidy payable to different classes of employees.

Revenue advises me that it is satisfied that the TWSS is correctly calculating the amount of subsidy due to employees in accordance with the legislation contained in The Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (COVID-19) Act 2020 and my determination letter of 16 April 2020 and that there are no plans for a review.

Insurance Industry Regulation

287. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to introduce better regulation of the insurance industry. [14908/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): At the outset, it is important to note that I am very much aware of the problems faced by many businesses and consumers in relation to the cost and availability of insurance. I also acknowledge the need to continue with the reform agenda and this is recognised in the Programme for Government’s cross-Departmental insurance agenda.

In terms of insurance regulatory reform, I believe much progress has been made through the work of the Cost of Insurance Working Group. Key legislative reforms include:

- The Central Bank (National Claims Information Database) Act 2018 to increase transparency
- Amendments to sections 8 and 14 of the Civil Liability and Courts Act 2004 to make it easier for businesses to challenge fraudulent claims
- The Personal Injuries Amendment Board (Amendment) Act 2019 to strengthen the role of PIAB
- The Non-Life Insurance (Provision of Information) (Renewal of Policy of Insurance) Regulations 2007 (S.I. No. 74 of 2007) with regard to new requirements on insurance renewal
- The Insurance (Amendment) Act 2018 to address issues relating to the liquidation of Sianta Insurance

In terms of reform, a necessary step is to bring the levels of personal injury damages awarded in this country more in line with those awarded in other jurisdictions. The establishment of the Judicial Council in December is very important in this regard, and it is expected that the

Personal Injuries Guidelines Committee will submit draft Guidelines to the Judicial Council by 28 October. The aim is that such guidelines can result in the lowering of award levels and a more consistent application of making awards in courts. I would expect the insurance industry to reflect lower award levels in lower premiums.

Another important reform is the Consumer Insurance Contract Act 2019 which is due to be commenced on a phased basis shortly. The commencing of the majority of the provisions of this Act will, amongst other things, place an onus on insurers to handle claims promptly and fairly, and reform other aspects of insurance law such as the practice of warranties and replacing the principle of insurable interest.

However, it is also important to recognise that there is no single policy or legislative measure that will remedy the cost and availability of insurance. There are also many constraints faced by the Government in trying to address matters in this policy space, in particular the fact that Government cannot direct the courts as to the award levels that should be applied or direct insurance companies as to their pricing levels.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasise that insurance reform is a key priority for this Government and as noted above this is reflected in the programme for Government. This is an issue that I, as Minister for Finance, Minister of State Chambers in my Department and other Ministerial colleagues will focus our energies and cooperate on as part of our collective contribution to the Government's commitment to deliver further insurance reforms.

Ministerial Responsibilities

288. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Finance the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for financial services, credit unions and insurance; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15043/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): No formal Delegation of Ministerial Functions Orders have been signed. This position is kept under review in light of the requirements of the role.

Question No. 289 answered with Question No. 275.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

290. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Finance whether a company that has placed employees on the temporary wage subsidy scheme and submitted a questionnaire to the Revenue Commissioners but has not lost 25% of turnover will not have to pay anything back to the Revenue Commissioners on behalf of the employees; whether the employees will receive a tax bill at year end as a result of being on the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15085/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is a measure designed to maintain employment during the public health restrictions necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, the scheme has provided in excess of €1.9 billion in support to almost 59,000 employers in respect of some 568,000 employees. There are approximately 410,000 employees currently receiving support through the scheme.

The Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (COVID-19) Act 2020 places the administration of the TWSS under the care and management of Revenue, which includes ensuring

that this significant investment of public funds is properly allocated to eligible employers and employees. In the exercise of this important role, Revenue is conducting a programme of compliance checks on all employers availing of the scheme to confirm that they meet the eligibility criteria, and crucially that employees are receiving the correct amount of subsidy due to them.

In order to verify eligibility, Revenue is asking employers to summarise the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on their business, the basis on which they reasonably anticipated a reduction of 25% or more in their turnover in Quarter 2 of this year, and whether the expected level of reduction actually occurred. I assume that the questionnaire referred to by the Deputy relates to this information request.

I am advised by Revenue that, where a business had a reasonable basis for projecting a minimum 25% decrease in turnover, but ultimately suffered a lesser reduction in trade, it will require that employer to exit the scheme on a prospective basis, but will not seek retrospective repayment. However, where a business was clearly not eligible for the scheme or failed to pay the correct level of subsidy to its employees, or abused the scheme in any other way, there will be a requirement to repay the funds received. Revenue has also advised me that any identified abuse of the TWSS will also lead to a more in-depth examination of the employer's overall tax position.

TWSS payments to employees are liable to both income tax and Universal Social Charge (USC) by the employee. These amounts are not being collected in real-time through the PAYE system but will instead become liable by the employee at year end and will be calculated by Revenue as part of the 'End of Year Review' process. However, the level of tax and USC due by any employee may be reduced or eliminated by the amount of unused tax credits available. Any liability due may also be further reduced if the employee has additional tax credits, for example health expenses, to offset. Revenue has also very recently placed all recipients of the TWSS (and the Pandemic Unemployment Payment) on the 'week 1 basis' of taxation for the remainder of 2020 to 'preserve' unused tax credits that can then be used to offset any tax or USC liabilities that arise.

Revenue has also assured me that if any tax and USC liabilities still arise following the allocation of unused credits, it will work with the employees impacted upon to collect the outstanding liabilities over an extended period. This will be achieved by reducing their tax credits for future years, thereby minimising any financial hardship to the greatest extent possible.

Banking Licences

291. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance the number of applications that were received for banking licences here in each of the years 2015 to 2019, inclusive, and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15106/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Central Bank has provided tabular details of the number of applications received for banking licences for the period 2015 to date. It should be noted that the table does not include assessments in relation to material expansions of activities by existing banking licence holders, which were undertaken in the context of Brexit, as these did not constitute new licences.

The following are the details for the period 2015 to date:

Year	Number of Applications Received
2015	One

Year	Number of Applications Received
2016	None
2017	None
2018	None
2019	One
2020 (to date)	None

Banking Licences

292. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance the number of new banking licences that were issued here in each of the years 2015 to 2019, inclusive, and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15107/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Central Bank has provided tabular details of the number of new banking licences issued for the period 2015 to date. It should be noted that the table does not include assessments in relation to material expansions of activities by existing banking licence holders, which were undertaken in the context of Brexit, as these did not constitute new licences.

Year	Number of Licences Granted
2015	One
2016	None
2017	None
2018	None
2019	One
2020 (to date)	None

Financial Services Sector

293. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the roll-out of the Ireland for Finance strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15108/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Ireland for Finance strategy was launched by the former Minister of State for Financial Services and Insurance, Michael D'Arcy TD, and myself in April 2019. The launch was held in Iveagh House, and it was attended by a large number of executives and financial sector leaders from across the industry. A number of guests travelled from many different locations abroad for the launch. It attracted extensive media coverage, both domestically and internationally.

During the following months, the Minister of State undertook a number of visits to key global markets to launch the Strategy and to further promote Ireland as a top-tier location of choice for specialist international financial services. His itinerary included Brussels, London, New York, Hong Kong and Tokyo. It included engagements with senior executives in firms across a range of financial services sectors in each city.

Since the launch of Ireland for Finance last year, there have been a number of significant financial services investments secured such as:

- Fundrock's regional second site in Limerick was opened where it intends to employ 45 people
- Rimes decided to establish its first office in Ireland in Cork

- Japanese company JRI America Inc. announced that it will further expand its Technology Centre in Tralee, Co. Kerry, creating 100 new jobs over 5 years
- Australian company, EML Payments Limited decided to establish a Technology & Innovation Hub in Galway, employing 20 people
- Carne, an Irish founded global provider of fund management company solutions to the asset management industry, announced a significant expansion in its Irish operations, creating an additional 250 regional jobs over the next three years in the South East
- Opus Fund Services announced its decision to establish a regional second site in Wexford, creating 100 jobs
- DMS announced that it is to create 50 further jobs in Cashel and locate several global centres of excellence there
- Boston-based Liberty Mutual Group announced that it will create 120 new jobs in Cavan town over the next 3 years
- Mastercard announced its plans to create 1,500 jobs in the next three to five years as it significantly grows its new European Technology Hub in Dublin
- there were also openings of new or renovated offices by Deutsche Börse Group in Cork and Elavon in Arklow

Other highlights since the launch of the Ireland for Finance strategy include the establishment of a steering committee to oversee the development of the Fintech Foresight Group. This steering committee will be chaired by Brian Hayes, CEO of the Banking & Payments Federation of Ireland. Fintech is a growth area for international financial services and we were pleased to submit our response to the European Commission's recent consultation on Digital Finance.

Considerable work has also been done by the Industry Advisory Committee on establishing a Women in Finance Charter and I look forward to further developments on this initiative throughout the year. Research shows that diverse teams can improve the quality of decision-making, reduce groupthink and allow assumptions to be challenged more effectively, and this is why Diversity was included as a horizontal priority of the Ireland for Finance strategy.

Sustainable Finance was also highlighted as a horizontal priority of the Ireland for Finance strategy and there have been a number of developments in this space also. Ireland's second Climate Finance Week was held in November 2019 with some 2,000 delegates attending 18 events over the week. All relevant industry representative associations supported Climate Finance Week, including the signing of a statement of intent to support the sustainable finance agenda within their organisations. As part of Climate Finance Week we also saw the launch of a deep dive review of future ESG skills report and the publication of the second Irish ESG State of Play report.

The fifth edition of the European Financial Forum was held on 12 February 2020 in Dublin Castle. The European Financial Forum is an annual event that showcases Ireland's international financial services environment to an international audience, and highlights the Government of Ireland's commitment to the development of the international financial services sector. This year's event was another great success where attendees heard from Mary Daly, President and CEO of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco; Norihiro Takahashi, President of the Government Pension Investment Fund of Japan; Francisco Aristeguieta, CEO of International Business for State Street Corporation; and Steven Maijoor, Chair of the European Securities and Markets Authority (ESMA).

You may recall that under the previous strategy for the development of international financial services, 'IFS2020' launched in 2015, there was an ambitious target of 10,000 net new jobs in the five year period to end 2019. The jobs figures as reported by the agencies, IDA and Enterprise Ireland, indicate an increase of approximately 11,500 net new jobs over the lifetime of the IFS2020 strategy to end-2019 meaning the strategy achieved additional 1,500 new jobs over the estimate. I am also pleased to report that one-third of these jobs are located in the regions outside of Dublin.

A draft Ireland for Finance Action Plan for 2020 was compiled in December 2019 but was not published before the General Election was called. As you will know, the Ireland for Finance strategy was included in the Programme for Government and the Action Plan for 2020 will also be considered by the recently appointed Minister of State at the Department of Finance, Jack Chambers TD, in light of developments such as Covid-19. We expect to bring the Ireland for Finance Action Plan for 2020 to Government for a decision in the near future.

We expect that Action Plan 2020, and those that follow, will be informed by the important work that the Ireland for Finance team have been carrying out with the European Commission and DG FISMA on FinTech and Sustainable Finance. The Commission is due to publish new strategies for both areas before the end of 2020 and as part of the consultation process, the Department of Finance has carried out a comprehensive engagement with all of the relevant stakeholders for these sectors in Ireland. The aim of this work has been to ensure that the international financial services sector in Ireland is best placed to respond to the job creation opportunities that the transition to a more digital and climate resilient future will present. By aligning the work of Ireland for Finance with the work of the Commission, the Department of Finance is positioning the sector to play an important role in the recovery of the economy, as a source of resilient and growing employment.

Question No. 294 answered with Question No. 275.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

295. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if the top-up payment paid to a staff member under the temporary wage subsidy scheme is a tax-deductible expense for the business owner in view of the fact that the business owner is currently paying income tax or corporation tax on the top-up; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15164/20]

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.

I am advised by Revenue that in computing the employer's liability to income tax or corporation tax, as the case may be, the employer is not entitled to a deduction in respect of TWSS payments paid to an eligible employee. However, any top up of a TWSS payment, by way of the payment of normal wages to the employee by the employer, is deductible in computing the employer's liability to income tax or corporation tax in the normal manner.

Value Added Tax

296. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance his options in respect of a reduction of the 13% VAT rate currently applicable to the hospitality sector; if he cannot lower this rate below 5%; if that is the case, the reason therefor; if he has had contact with the Euro-

pean Commission regarding potential VAT reductions in the economy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15165/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that the VAT rating of goods and services is subject to the requirements of EU VAT law, with which Irish VAT law must comply. In general, the reduced rate of VAT (13.5%) currently applies to accommodation, certain recreational activities and supplies of food and drink in restaurants, excluding alcohol and soft drinks.

Under EU VAT law, Member States may only have two reduced rates which cannot be higher than 15% and no lower than 5%. These lower rates can only be applied to a prescribed list of services in Annex III of the VAT Directive 2006/112/EC. Ireland currently has two reduced rates, 9% and 13.5%. In order to introduce a new reduced rate, one of the current reduced rates would have to be removed. In general, the VAT rate on accommodation, certain recreational services, such as amusement parks, fairgrounds, cinemas, etc., can be reduced to a rate no lower than 5%. The provision of food and drink in restaurants can also be reduced to a rate no lower than 5%, with the possibility to excluding alcohol and soft drinks.

Ireland, in line with the VAT Directive, also maintains several standstill provisions and derogations that allows it to maintain reduced rates, zero rates and exemptions to certain supplies for historical reasons. These standstill provisions and derogations cannot be extended.

Value Added Tax

297. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance the amounts generated by the 23% VAT rate in each year since 2012, in tabular form; if he has considered reducing the rate in order to stimulate businesses, particularly in the retail sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15166/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that VAT registered traders are not required to separately identify the VAT generated from a particular activity or product type on their VAT returns. However, using Revenue and other third-party data, an estimate of the VAT generated at the standard rate (currently 23%) for the years 2012 to 2019 is provided below.

Year	Yield Standard Rate (23%)€m
2012	€8,013
2013	€7,957
2014	€8,530
2015	€9,153
2016	€9,690
2017	€9,546
2018	€10,045
2019	€10,901

Information in relation to the effect of a VAT rate change on receipts is available on page 25 in the Revenue Ready Reckoner at link which the Deputy may be interested in:

www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/ready-reckoner.pdf.

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 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.

Tax Code

298. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance the amount generated by alcohol excise duty in each year since 2012, in tabular form; if he has considered reducing the rate in order to stimulate businesses, particularly in the hospitality sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15167/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that the receipts generated by Excise Duty on alcohols for the years 2012 to 2018 are published on the Revenue website at link: www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/excise/net-receipts-by-commodity.pdf.

The Excise Duty receipts on alcohol for 2019 amounted to €1,233 million.

In relation to the issue of the rate of alcohol excise duty, as the Deputy will be aware, it is a longstanding practice of the Minister for Finance not to comment, in advance of the Budget, on any tax matters that might be the subject of Budget decisions. The Deputy will be further aware that the Government's July stimulus package to boost the economy following the COVID crisis will contain measures to support businesses and their employees.

Value Added Tax

299. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address a matter (details supplied) relating to custom duties and VAT on the importation of medical devices and protective equipment in order to help in the fight against Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15207/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The European Commission Decision C(2020)2146, adopted on 3 April 2020, provides for the importation of goods to fight the effects of COVID -19 (including personal protective equipment) from outside the European Union without the payment of VAT or Customs Duty from January 2020. Such relief is permitted where the goods are imported by or on behalf of State bodies, public bodies and other bodies governed by public law, disaster relief agencies and organisations approved by Revenue including organisations regulated by the State and involved in the care, support and treatment of people at risk of COVID-19 and there is no scope to extend this. The goods must be distributed or made available free of charge to the persons affected by or at risk from or involved in combating the COVID-19 outbreak by the bodies and organisations referred to above. The relief is scheduled to end on 31 July 2020 but there is provision for an extension if this is required following a review and consultation with Member States. An extension of 3 months is currently being considered.

Following a request from my Department, Revenue has also implemented, on an administrative basis, the application of the zero rate of VAT to the domestic supply of certain goods as necessary to combat COVID-19 (including personal protective equipment) when supplied to

hospitals, nursing homes, GP practices and the like, for use in the delivery of COVID-19 related health care services to their patients. This concessionary treatment will apply until 31 July, subject to review. The scope of the relief corresponds with the relief on the importation of these goods by the bodies specified in the Commission Decision.

Any further extension of zero rating to cover supplies of personal protection equipment would require a change in legislation at EU level; the VAT Directive would not permit a legislative measure for the application of the zero rate of VAT to such supplies and there are no grounds in the Commission Decision that would support the adoption of such a measure, even on a temporary basis.

Value Added Tax

300. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance his views on correspondence in respect of the VAT rate (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15227/20]

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 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.

Value Added Tax

301. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider temporarily reducing VAT on retail (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15233/20]

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 our people can get back to work as quickly and seamlessly as possible.

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

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

302. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address a matter relating to the temporary wage subsidy scheme (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15249/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme

(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 were on the payroll at 29 February 2020; and,
- the employer had fulfilled its PAYE reporting obligations for February 2020, by 15 March 2020 (which date was recently extended to 31 March 2020 by Revenue concession and subject to conditions).

The TWSS is predicated on the employer wanting to keep the employees on the payroll and to retain them until business picks up. The amount of the subsidy for each employee is calculated based on the average net weekly pay reported for January and February 2020. Furthermore, the TWSS legislation makes no distinction between employees by reference to their age. All eligible employees of qualifying employers are entitled to the wage subsidy. It is not intended that this position will change in any future iteration of the scheme.

Policy responsibility for the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment is a matter for my colleague the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

State Bodies

303. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the number of vacancies by job title in the Office of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman as of 3 July 2020; and the estimated full-year cost of filling those vacancies, in tabular form. [15263/20]

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

The FSPO has advised me that the number of vacancies at 3 July 2020 and the estimated full year costs are as follows:

Grade	Number of Vacancies	Full Year Costs
Assistant Principal Officer	2	€170,143
Higher Executive Officer	2	€117,332
Executive Officer	14	€508,882

The Ombudsman has also informed me that the estimated costs are based on salaries at the starting point on the relevant scale plus employer costs. Different terms and conditions may apply, if, immediately prior to appointment, the appointee is already a serving Civil Servant or Public Servant.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

304. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Finance the reason a company (details supplied) is permitted to make staff redundant while availing of the temporary wage subsidy scheme; if this can be suspended until all options are assessed, that is, to give business a chance to recover after Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15295/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Government's priority in so far as

the Temporary Wages Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is concerned was and is to ensure that all employers experiencing significant negative economic disruption from COVID-19 can register for and start to receive payment quickly. The ambition of the scheme is to ensure the relationship between employers and employees is maintained to the greatest extent possible so that businesses can restart operations quickly once the crisis has passed.

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, eligible employers can participate in the scheme in respect of any eligible employees on their payroll, including rehired staff who were temporarily laid off. Eligibility for the scheme can be satisfied by an employer once they meet the relevant criteria, which can be at any point in time during the scheme's duration.

The amount of the subsidy for each employee is calculated based on the average net weekly pay of the employee as reported to Revenue for January and February 2020. With regard to the subsidy amount, there is no distinction made between businesses who closed due to the restrictions and businesses who continued to trade, with employees continuing to work full time with similar hours as before the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Deputy will be aware that I cannot comment on any specific employer that may have been mentioned in information supplied with his question. I can say, however, that the TWSS has no role in relation to the employer / employee relationship in so far as terms, conditions, entitlements and rights of the employment are concerned. Consequently, the operation and management of redundancy is a matter between the employer and employee concerned and is outside the remit of the TWSS.

Tax Credits

305. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Finance if he is considering the introduction of a tax credit to allow persons to buy digital technologies to assist them to work remotely. [15369/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Section 114 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (TCA) allows an employee or office holder to claim a deduction for expenses incurred by him or her wholly, exclusively **and** necessarily in the performance of the duties of his or her employment or office. This may include expenses incurred on digital technology, if all elements of the requirement are met.

Furthermore, an employer may provide certain equipment to employees to enable them to work from home, without a taxable benefit-in-kind arising if certain conditions are met. Where an employer provides the following equipment to an employee specifically for business use, and any personal use is incidental, a taxable benefit-in-kind will not arise:

- a computer (including a laptop or hand-held computer),
- a printer,
- a scanner,
- a modem,
- software,
- discs, disc drives and other computer-peripheral devices.

An employer may also provide a dedicated home telephone landline, mobile phone or high-speed home internet connection to an employee for business use. Where the employer bears the cost of installation and use of a home telephone landline, mobile phone or high-speed home internet connection for an employee, a taxable benefit-in-kind will not arise provided any personal use is incidental.

Where an employee uses his or her personal home telephone landline or mobile phone for business purposes a portion of the bill (including line rental) may be reimbursed by the employer without a charge to tax arising. In determining the element of the bill to be reimbursed by the employer it is necessary to make a reasonable estimate of the business use of the phone and to retain records used in calculating same. In such circumstances, the employee may not also claim a deduction for this expense under section 114 TCA.

Further information on the operation of benefit-in-kind on employer provided equipment can be found on Revenue's website at the following link:

www.revenue.ie/en/employing-people/benefit-in-kind-for-employers/other-benefits/internet-computers-phones-and-work-related-supplies.aspx

Given the existing provision for deductibility of such expenses under section 114 TCA, I have no plans at present to introduce a further tax credit to allow individuals to buy digital technologies to assist with remote working.

Credit Unions

306. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance if a series of matters will be examined in relation to credit unions (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15391/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Government welcomes the important work credit unions are doing to support communities throughout Ireland at this difficult time and recognises 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.

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 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. I understand that this report is almost complete and will be submitted to me in the coming days.

There are several commitments in the Programme for Government relating to credit unions, which will be expanded upon in the coming weeks and months as the new Government beds down, taking into account work already completed such as the CUAC report noted above and a separate CUAC report on directors finalised in February 2020.

Since 2004, the amount of the Industry Funding Levy payable by a credit union has been capped at a rate of 0.01% of its total assets as at 30 September of the previous year. The balance of regulatory costs has been funded by the Central Bank in accordance with the provisions of the Central Bank Act, 1942 (as amended). The cost of regulating the credit union sector has increased over recent years with the emergence of the necessity to increase the intensity of su-

pervision of this sector. In 2018, the credit union sector contributed €1.7 million (circa 9% of the total costs incurred in regulating the sector).

During 2019, I approved the Central Bank request to recover 50 per cent of credit union costs on a phased basis, starting with a 20% recovery rate for the 2019 levy, which will be levied on an arrears basis in 2020, moving to 35% in 2020 (levied in 2021) and to 50% in 2021 (levied in 2022).

In response to the Central Bank's request, I also recommended that credit union contributions should not increase beyond the 50% target until: 1) the levy trajectory has reached the planned 50 per cent rate, at which time the impact on the viability of the sector will be better understood; and 2) a public consultation regarding increasing the levy rate for credit unions beyond 50% is undertaken, which would include a regulatory impact assessment of such a change on the sector.

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

It is also worth noting that the Department of Finance, in collaboration with the Central Bank, held a public consultation in 2019 on potential changes to the Credit Institutions Resolution Fund Levy. Following this review, I announced on 1 October 2019 a reduction in the levy rate which will result in a reduction of €4 million per annum from €9 million in 2019 to €5 million from 2020, or 44% reduction. My Department is also currently carrying out a review of the Stabilisation Levy which will be completed shortly.

In relation to regulatory reserves, adequate reserves (capital) support a credit union's operations, provide a base for future growth and protect against the risk of unforeseen losses. The minimum regulatory reserve to be maintained by all credit unions under Central Bank regulations is 10% of the assets of the credit union. Credit unions had average reserves of 16% as at December 2019. Given the current reserves position of credit unions, the level of the minimum regulatory reserve requirement does not represent an impediment to growth in credit union lending.

The Central Bank informs me that the current reserve requirement for credit unions is a reflection of a number of factors including: available sources of reserves (retained earnings); the need for individual credit unions to have the capacity to absorb potential losses; and the business model currently operated by credit unions, which is predominantly focused on the provision of short-term personal lending. In setting the minimum regulatory reserve requirement, the Central Bank are mindful of the financial resilience of the sector, members confidence and the protection of members' funds.

The Deputy may be interested to note, however, that one of the "Additional Observations" contained in a 2019 Peer Review Report of the Central Bank's Performance of its regulatory functions in relation to credit unions - undertaken by the International Credit Union Regulators' Network (ICURN) - suggests that the Registry of Credit Unions conduct additional stress-testing on regulatory reserves under the existing leverage ratio and risk-weighted reserve approach. The Registry of Credit Unions has advised me that it will consider this suggestion as it plans its work around implementation of the Peer Review Team's recommendations. The Central Bank informs me that introducing a risk weighted approach could place a disproportionate burden on individual credit unions involving a requirement for system enhancements and a level of new expertise with associated cost impacts for individual credit unions.

Credit unions already have the ability to improve their loan to asset ratio, including through additional consumer lending, mortgage and SME lending, either individually or through collaborative efforts. Following recent revisions to Central Bank lending regulations, the sector currently has capacity to lend an additional €1.1 billion for mortgage and SME lending collectively, with further additional lending capacity available to credit unions which can comply with certain conditions or on approval by the Central Bank. As at end 2019, credit unions had a mortgage and SME loan book of approximately €300 million.

As part of the Government's COVID-19 supports, it is proposed to revise the Credit Guarantee Scheme (CGS). The scheme is a Department of Business, Enterprise & Innovation (DBEI) scheme, operated by the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI), and is already available for banks, non-banks and credit unions to participate in, subject to certain conditions. Officials from DBEI, SBCI and my Department have been and will be available to discuss the CGS and other State financing supports with banks, non-banks and credit unions.

I and my officials will continue to engage constructively to assist credit unions in delivering new services to their members, including potential involvement in the CGS and Government initiatives in relation to retrofitting.

Question No. 307 answered with Question No. 275.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

308. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the way in which those self-employed persons now on Covid-19 payments will be taxed in 2020 and into 2021; and the way in which their tax credits will be applied for this tax year and the next; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15417/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Payments made under the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) scheme are income supports and share the characteristics of income. Other income earners in receipt of comparable "normal wages" are taxable on those wages. In the interest of equity, therefore, payments under the PUP scheme are subject to income tax. However, following the general taxation rule for social welfare benefit, payments under the PUP scheme are exempt from the USC and PRSI charges.

The PUP payments are not taxed in real-time. Thus, self-employed taxpayers must complete and return their annual income tax return (Form 11) by 31 October in the following tax year and pay the tax due in respect of PUP payments when making their annual income tax payment. Revenue advises me that it will pre-populate the Form 11 with details of the cumulative PUP payment amounts paid to self-employed taxpayers.

In cases where the tax liability for the PUP payments exceeds unused personal tax credits for 2020, the level of tax due by the person may be reduced or eliminated by the amount of unused tax credits available to him or her at the end of the year. Any liability due may also be further reduced if the person has additional tax credits, for example health expenses, to offset.

Revenue advises me that the final calculation of the end of year liability for each person is dependent on a range of factors, including a person's civil status, their available tax credits, the amount received under PUP, as well as other entitlements and credits, such as health expenses. As there are considerable differences in each person's tax circumstances, it is not possible to provide details of the estimated undercharges arising from the taxation of payments under the

PUP, nor to estimate the numbers of individuals who may have such undercharges. These details will not be available with any degree of accuracy until after the year end.

Vehicle Registration Tax

309. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the methods by which VRT on imported cars are calculated; the mechanism there is for appeal in circumstances in which an error has clearly been made; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15474/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Vehicle Registration Tax (VRT) is based on the Open Market Selling Price (OMSP) of an imported vehicle, which is defined as the price it might reasonably be expected to fetch if sold in the State. The OMSP is determined by reference to the vehicle model, level of CO2 emissions, level of Nitrogen Oxide emissions, mileage, condition of the vehicle, and any special features or characteristics. Different levels of VRT apply to electric and hybrid cars. An additional VRT charge may arise in the case of late registration of an imported vehicle.

I am advised by Revenue that extensive material is available on its website at link; www.revenue.ie/en/importing-vehicles-duty-free-allowances/guide-to-vrt/calculating-vrt/index.aspx regarding all aspects of VRT, including the methodology used to value vehicles (for VRT purposes). Revenue's website also offers an online VRT calculator, that enables users to estimate the VRT applicable to an extensive range and age of imported vehicles, which is available at link;

www.ros.ie/evrt-enquiry/vrtenquiry.html?execution=e1s1.

The VRT appeal procedure against Revenue valuations of imported vehicles is a two-stage process. Firstly, it is open to a person who has paid the VRT but who disagrees with the valuation applied, to appeal the decision directly to Revenue. Such 'first stage' valuation appeals are dealt with by Revenue's Central Vehicle Office and customers (appellants) have two months after the date of registration of the vehicle to make such an appeal in writing. Appeals should be made via Revenue's on-line enquiry system at link; www.revenue.ie/en/online-services/services/manage-your-record/myenquiries.aspx or in writing to the Office of the Revenue Commissioners, VRT Appeals, Government Offices, Anne Street, Wexford Y35 E29K.

The 'first stage' appeal consists of a re-examination of the valuation by a Revenue official who was not involved in the original decision. In considering an appeal, Revenue will take account of any additional information provided by the appellant and will also consider issues such as the condition of the vehicle. Where the appellant remains dissatisfied after Revenue's 'first stage' determination, s/he can apply to have the case heard by the independent Tax Appeals Commission (TAC). The appellant must submit a Notice of Appeal directly to the TAC within 30 days of receiving Revenue's 'first stage' decision.

The TAC can be contacted by email at info@taxappeals.ie or by telephone at 01-6624530.

Vehicle Registration Tax

310. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Finance if immediate action will be taken to eliminate the backlog in the vehicle registration process in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15525/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am informed by Revenue that the

appointed agent for the registration of vehicles, Applus, has re-opened the National Car Testing Service (NCTS) Centres for VRT purposes after 10 weeks' closure due to Covid-19. The Centres were re-opened on a phased basis between June 8 and June 29 and every effort is now being made to reduce the waiting times for appointments and to clear the backlog.

I am also informed by Revenue that it monitors the level of service provided on an ongoing basis. In the context of the reopening and the safety protocols involved, all of the Centres have fewer opportunities to increase their services as they would have done prior to the closure. This has resulted in particular congestion in a number of Centres including the two Cork Centres and the Limerick and Tralee Centres. Staff in these Centres are working late evenings and weekends to deal with the backlog. In addition, the service provider is increasing the number of cars on call-out to pre-inspect cars for authorised motor dealers. Overall, Revenue is satisfied, notwithstanding the current congestion in some Centres because of the exceptional demand for appointments following the closure, that the service being provided is reasonable.

I am further informed by Revenue that registration by authorised dealers on the Revenue Online Service (ROS) of new cars and cars that have been pre-inspected was not interrupted during the closure of the NCTS Centres – further information about pre-inspection is on the Revenue website at the following link: www.revenue.ie/en/importing-vehicles-duty-free-allowances/guide-to-vrt/authorised-dealers-and-processes/pre-inspection-by-national-car-testing-service-ncts.aspx.

Personal Injury Claims

311. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to personal injuries claims being taken on the basis of persons claiming to have contracted Covid-19 in specific premises; if there is a clear plan to ensure business are not unfairly held liable in these circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15699/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): At the outset, I wish to emphasise that specific details on businesses operating in the context of the pandemic are a matter for my colleague the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and his Department. In addition to this, matters of liability fall under the remit of the Department of Justice and my colleague the Minister for Justice.

Having noted this, in my remit as Minister for Finance I do appreciate that many businesses operating in the new environment have genuine concerns regarding whether they will have insurance cover for claims relating to COVID-19. Whether a business's insurance provides cover for such claims will depend on the specifics of the business's 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 future claims for COVID-19. In this regard, it should be noted that neither I, nor the Central Bank of Ireland, 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 businesses if they allege that they have contracted COVID-19 on their property, I am not aware of any such personal injury claims being made and therefore cannot comment on this. At this juncture, I would like to emphasise that while it may be possible for a claim to be made, it may well be the case that it would be difficult to prove where a person specifically 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 and this is also true for all individuals in terms of their own health. Furthermore, I would urge all workplaces to review the COVID-19 Specific National Protocol for Employers and Workers as set out in the ‘Return to Work Safely Protocol’ (www.gov.ie/en/publication/22829a-return-to-work-safely-protocol/), which is the result of a collaborative effort by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), the Health Services Executive (HSE) and the Department of Health and the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment.

Value Added Tax

312. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Finance if yoga studios will be included in the reduced VAT rate group of 9%, matching the reduced rate enjoyed by other sporting facilities and activities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15855/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The VAT rating of goods and services is subject to the requirements of the EU VAT Directive, with which Irish VAT law must comply. In general, the VAT Directive provides that all goods and services are liable to VAT at the standard rate unless they fall within Annex III of the Directive, in respect of which Member States may apply either one or two reduced rates of VAT. The “use of sporting facilities” is specifically listed in Annex III which therefore allows Ireland to apply the second reduced rate, currently 9%.

Services consisting of the care of the human body supplied in the course of a health studio business or similar business, such as a yoga studio, are not listed in Annex III and therefore would in general be subject to the standard rate. However, the Directive allows for historic VAT treatment to be maintained under certain conditions and Ireland has retained the application of the reduced rate of VAT, currently 13.5%, to the services of yoga studios. This is known as a ‘parked rate’ and the continuation of this reduced rate application is conditional on the rate being no less than 12%. Therefore, there is no discretion under the Directive to apply the 9% rate to these services.

Revenue Commissioners

313. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the Revenue Commissioners are issuing letters to many SMEs which claimed the Covid-19 restart grants informing them that their business accounts will be audited; the reason for such actions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15881/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) is a vital support to maintaining employment during the public health restrictions necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, the scheme has provided almost €2 billion in support to over 61,000 employers in respect of some 600,000 employees. There are approximately 405,000 employees currently receiving support through the scheme. The TWSS is available to employers across all sectors, including SMEs.

The Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (COVID-19) Act 2020 places the administration of the TWSS under the care and management of Revenue. This responsibility includes ensuring that the very significant investment of public funds is properly allocated to eligible employers and employees. In the exercise of this important role, Revenue is conducting a programme of compliance checks on all employers availing of the scheme to confirm that they meet the eligibility criteria and, crucially, that the monies involved are being properly paid out

to employees. These compliance checks, of which approximately 5,000 have already issued to employers, will be completed over the next few months.

In order to verify TWSS eligibility, Revenue is asking employers to summarise the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on their business, the basis on which they reasonably anticipated a reduction of 25% or more in their turnover or in customer orders during Quarter 2 of this year, and whether the expected level of reduction actually occurred. Where a business had a reasonable basis for projecting the 25% decrease in turnover, but ultimately suffered a lesser reduction, Revenue will require it to exit the scheme on a prospective basis only.

However, where a business was clearly not eligible for the scheme or failed to pay the correct level of subsidy to its employees, or abused the scheme in any other way, there will be a requirement to repay the funds received. Any identified abuse of the TWSS will also lead to a more in-depth examination of the employer's overall tax position. Revenue is also requesting copies of employee payslips from employers as part of the compliance checks to ensure that employees are being fairly treated and TWSS funds are being paid out as intended.

Revenue has confirmed that these compliance checks are not tax audits of business accounts as suggested by the Deputy. Revenue has also advised me that providing this basic information should not impose a significant overhead or difficulty for employers. However, where any employer needs further time to produce the documentation, Revenue has assured me that it will be granted once the employer makes contact to confirm when the information will be available.

Finally, Revenue has confirmed that it has already received prompt and satisfactory replies from many of the employers contacted to date.

Banking Sector

314. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the accrual and charging of interest accrued during the moratorium period for mortgage payment breaks issued in the context of Covid-19 was not required under EBA guidelines in advance of his meeting with an organisation (details supplied) and five retail banks on 11 May 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15900/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Members of the Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland introduced the payment break for their customers on 18 March last to provide relief for people whose income had been affected by the Covid-1 crisis.

The EBA guidelines of 2 April stated the following in paragraph 24:

“The moratorium changes only the schedule of payments. This condition is consistent with the objective of the moratorium to address the systemic short-term liquidity shortages. In order to achieve this objective, the moratoria suspend, postpone or reduce the payments (principal interest or both) within a limited period of time. This clearly affects the whole schedule of payment and may lead to increased payments after the period of the moratorium or an extended duration of the loan. However, the moratorium should not affect other conditions of the loan, in particular the interest rate, unless such change only serves for compensation to avoid losses which an institution otherwise would have due to the delayed payment schedule under the moratorium, which would allow the impact on the net present value to be neutralised.”

Banks across Europe interpreted the above paragraph in different ways with the results that different schemes were introduced. Some countries provided for the accrual and capitalisation of the interest. Others provided for the non-accrual and a number provided for accrual of the

interest but not its capitalisation.

Subsequently, in its letter to Deputy Doherty on 22 June last, the Central Bank stated that the EBA was expected to provide further clarity on the specific issue of interest accrual and it outlined that both net present value (NPV) neutral and NPV negative solutions are possible.

In its implementation report published on 7 July the EBA stated that the report “provides clarification on questions raised in the context of the EBA’s monitoring of the implementation of Covid-19 policies”.

A key clarification is that:

“ There may be a decline in the NPV if the obligor makes use of the moratorium and postpones one or several payments and no interest is charged for the time covered by the moratorium. Alternatively, the moratorium may be NPV-neutral (i.e. no change in the NPV) if subsequently at least one of the instalments is adjusted upwards or added.”

The Irish payment moratorium introduced by the Members of the BPFi complies fully with the EBA Guidelines because, as outlined above, it is NPV-neutral.

The payment moratorium introduced in Ireland by the members of the BPFi predated the EBA Guidelines of 2 April. The meeting on 11 May predated both the clarification provided to Deputy Doherty in late June and published by the EBA on 7 July.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

315. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance if he will clarify the situation regarding the rumoured tax bill at the end of the year for those on the temporary wage subsidy scheme. [15967/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 provides for the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS). The scheme is designed to maintain the relationship between employers and employees and minimise the impact on the economy to the greatest extent possible during the public health restrictions necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Payments made under the TWSS are income supports and share the characteristics of income and so are subject to income tax. The TWSS is also subject to USC, however, it is exempt from PRSI charges.

While the TWSS is not being taxed in real-time through the PAYE system, recipients may become liable for income tax and USC at the end of the year, which will be calculated by Revenue through the employee End of Year Review process.

The level of tax and USC due by any person at year end in respect of TWSS may be reduced or eliminated by the amount of unused tax credits available. Any liability due may also be further reduced if the person has additional tax credits, for example health expenses, to offset. Revenue has also very recently placed all recipients of the TWSS on the ‘week 1 basis’ of taxation for the remainder of 2020 to ‘preserve’ unused tax credits that can then be used to offset any tax or USC liabilities that arise.

Revenue has also assured me that if any tax and USC liabilities still arise following the allocation of unused credits, it will work with the persons impacted upon to collect the outstanding liabilities over an extended period. This will be achieved by reducing their tax credits for future

years, thereby minimising any financial hardship to the greatest extent possible.

I am advised by Revenue that the final calculation of the end of year liability for each person is dependent on a range of factors, including a person's civil status, the available tax credits, the actual amounts received during the year under the TWSS, any top-up payments made by the employer, as well as other entitlements and credits, such as health expenses. As there are considerable differences in each person's tax circumstances, it is not yet possible to provide details of the estimated undercharges (if any) arising from the taxation of TWSS. It is also not yet possible to estimate the numbers of taxpayers who may have such undercharges as these details will not be available with any degree of accuracy until after the year end.

Mortgage Lending

316. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance if guidance will be issued to banks regarding mortgage applications from persons whose income has been protected by their employer via the temporary wage subsidy scheme but are being refused regardless. [15969/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I fully appreciate the concerns many people are experiencing about mortgage applications and drawdowns at this difficult time, and my Department is maintaining close contact with the Central Bank and Banking and Payments Federation Ireland (BPFi) as the lending industry works to address the difficulties the Covid-19 situation is causing for both borrowers and lenders. In this context, the Central Bank has advised that it expects all regulated firms to take a consumer-focused approach and to act in their customer's best interests at all times, including during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the context of mortgage applications, lenders continue to process applications and have supports in place to assist customers impacted by COVID-19. The BPFi has published a Covid-19 Support FAQ document 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. However, within the parameters of the regulatory framework, as set out below, the decision to grant or refuse an individual application for mortgage credit, or temporarily suspend a mortgage approval in principle, is a commercial and contractual decision to be made by the regulated entity and it is not appropriate or possible for me to instruct lenders in that regard.

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 and 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. The CMCAR further provides that a lender should only make credit available to a consumer where the result of the creditworthiness assessment indicates that the consumer's obligations resulting from the credit agreement are likely to be met in the manner required under that agreement. 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

317. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance if the temporary wage subsidy scheme will be reviewed to ensure payments being made to employees are subject to the usual PAYE system rather than allowing potentially significant tax liabilities to develop; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16103/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The legislation underpinning the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) provides that payments to employees under the scheme are not taxable in real-time through the PAYE system. As the Deputy will appreciate, this was in keeping with the need to get financial support into the hands of affected workers as quickly as possible.

The subsidy payments remain liable to income tax and universal social charge (USC) in the hands of employees and will be taxed by way of review at the end of the tax year. Taxation of the TWSS payments is necessary from an equity perspective. The TWSS payments are a wage subsidy and taxpayers in receipt of comparable “normal wages” are taxable on those wages. Any top up of a TWSS payment by the payment of some element of normal wages by the employer remains taxable through the PAYE system.

The level of income tax and USC due by an employee may be reduced or eliminated by the amount of unused tax credits available to him at the end of the year. Any liability due may also be further reduced if the person has additional tax credits, for example health expenses, to offset. Revenue has also very recently placed all recipients of TWSS payments on what is known as the ‘week 1 basis’ of taxation for the remainder of the year in order to ‘preserve’ unused tax credits that can then be used to offset any income tax or USC liabilities that arise. Revenue has also assured me that if any income tax and USC liabilities still arise following the allocation of unused credits, it will work with its customers to collect the outstanding liabilities over an extended period. This will be achieved by reducing their tax credits for future years, thereby minimising any financial hardship to the greatest extent possible.

Public Inquiries

318. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Finance the number of tribunals, public investigations and commissions of investigations in process; the length of time each has been underway; when each will conclude; the cost to date of each; and the estimated cost of each at completion. [16134/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to inform the Deputy that there are no tribunals, public investigations or commissions of investigation set up under my Department. My Department is a stakeholder in two commissions of investigation, however these are set up under the Department of the Taoiseach.

Public Private Partnerships

319. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the total and individual Departmental cost in 2019 for public private partnerships for schools and education facilities, hospitals, health related facilities, roads and other transport infrastructure and housing projects. [14726/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Deputy may be interested to know that financial information for individual Public Private Partnership (PPP) projects are published on the *PPP.Gov.ie* website. The following table outlines the 2019

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unitary / availability payments broken down by project for each sector.

Department/Agency Project	2019 PPP unitary / availability payments (€m)
Health	
Primary Care Bundle	13.0
OPW	
National Conference Centre	24.1
Justice	
Criminal Courts Complex	22.1
Courts Bundle	12.9
Total Justice	35.0
Education	
5 Pilot Schools	10.9
National Maritime College	6.9
Cork School of Music	8.3
Schools Bundle 1	9.1
Schools Bundle 2	12.2
Schools Bundle 3	14.7
Schools Bundle 4	7.5
Schools Bundle 5	5.4
Total Education	75.0
Transport Infrastructure Ireland	
M3 Clonee Kells	18.9
Limerick Tunnel	1.6
M50 Upgrade	22.8
N11 Arklow / Rathnew (incl N7 Newland's Cross)	16.2
M17/18 Gort / Tuam	33.0
M11 Gorey / Enniscorthy	5.8
Total TII PPP	98.3
Concession Projects	
M4 Kilcock Kinnegad	0.0
M1 Dundalk	0.0
M8 Fermoy	2.5
N25 Waterford	6.0
N6 Galway Ballinasloe	2.3
M7/8 Portlaoise	0.7
MSA	0.0
Total TII Concession	11.5
Total PPP	245.4
Total Concession	11.5
Total	256.9

Pension Provisions

320. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the position of retired members of An Garda Síochána in respect of pension entitlements following the FEMPI cuts from 1 March 2012; his plans to restore parity in pension entitlement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15172/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): Public ser-

vice pensions, including those of retired members of An Garda Síochána, were reduced under the FEMPI legislation by way of the Public Service Pension Reduction (PSPR). The PSPR was introduced on 1 January 2011 under the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act (FEMPI) 2010 and extended on 1 July 2013 under the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act 2013.

As the Deputy may be aware, a three-stage partial reversal of PSPR was provided for in the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act 2015, occurring on 1 January in each of the years 2016, 2017 and 2018. The Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017 provided for the further lessening of the impact of PSPR in each of the years 2019 and 2020.

Following these PSPR amelioration measures, since 1 January 2020 the vast majority of public service pensions – an estimated 97% plus – are no longer subject to PSPR. A residual group of some 3,000 - 4,000 high-value pensions remain affected (with the majority of these being pre-March 2012 awarded pensions calculated on pre-FEMPI salary rates).

Section 27 of the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017 states that no later than 31 December 2020, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform will issue an order that will specify a date for the removal of PSPR from that residual group of PSPR-affected pensions.

Separate to PSPR amelioration, a pension increase policy with respect to pre-existing scheme pensions, including the Garda pension scheme, was agreed in 2017 under the Public Service Stability Agreement 2018-2020 (PSSA) based on the principle of “pay parity”.

Under that policy, pay increases granted to serving staff over the course of the PSSA are passed on to those pensions awarded under pre-existing public service schemes where the salary on which the pension is based does not exceed the salary of serving staff with the same grade and scale point, after the pay increase has been applied. If it qualifies, the pension is eligible for an increase to the extent that this will ensure alignment with the pay of serving staff.

Circulars in relation to this policy (and with respect to PSPR amelioration) have been issued by my Department, the most recent being Circular 19/2019 (available online at: www.gov.ie/en/circular/b5d982-circular-192019-further-instruction-on-the-pension-increase-policy-i/). This policy applies for the duration of the PSSA.

Office of Public Works

321. Deputy Frankie Feighan asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the OPW will provide immediate additional funding to assistance and equipment to Leitrim County Council to enable works to be completed on the recent site location in Drumkeeran, County Leitrim; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14686/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): Under the National Emergency Management Framework responsibility for responding to these events is the statutory responsibility of the relevant local authority.

In relation to the bog slide in the Drumkeeran area assistance in the form of emergency funding to deal with the aftermath of these type of events has, in the recent past, generally come from Government to the relevant local authority through the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, allowing the local authority to procure contractors to undertake the necessary clean up and remedial works. The OPW is in contact with Engineers in Leitrim County Council and providing advice as required.

Public Procurement Contracts

322. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the likely timescale for the completion of the tender process for a project (details supplied); when the project is expected to go to construction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14791/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The pre-qualification procedures for the Main Contractor and Reserved Specialists is ongoing during the current Covid-19 restrictions. We expect this to be completed early in Quarter 3, 2020. Subject to final approval, it is also expected that tender documentation will issue later in Quarter 3 2020, with a contract expected to be in place before the end of 2020. Construction work will take approx. 18 months to complete.

Ministerial Responsibilities

323. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will provide a copy of the departmental briefings received by him and each Minister of State in his Department upon taking up each individual role; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14808/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I wish to advise the Deputy that the briefing documents provided by my Department to Minister of State Smyth and myself following our appointments will be published on the Department's website on Friday, 17th July. The published version will have regard to the relevant provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2014. I understand that the Office of Public Works will be making similar arrangements in respect of the briefing supplied to Minister of State O'Donovan.

Public Procurement Contracts

324. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the changes he plans to make in relation to public procurement procedures. [14905/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Government has set out a number of commitments in the Programme for Government in relation to public procurement including evaluating and managing the environmental, economic and social impacts of procurement strategies within the state, developing and implementing a sustainable procurement policy and tasking the Office of Government Procurement (OGP) to update all procurement frameworks in line with green procurement practice.

This is in line with work already underway by the OGP which has been developing proposals on the refinement of the procurement reform programme following consultation with our colleagues across Government and industry. The OGP is striving to enhance public procurement, building on the progress to date, with a more strategic focus and greater emphasis on sustainability, social responsibility, SME access, innovation, digitalisation and professionalisation.

I, along with my colleagues in Government, will be considering how best to implement the commitments in the Programme for Government. Minister of State Smyth and I have met with the Chief Procurement Officer and will be having further discussions with the OGP in this regard.

Waterways Issues

325. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the undermining of a building by a river at a location (details supplied) in County Kerry will be investigated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14976/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The channel in question does not form part of an arterial drainage scheme completed under the 1945 Arterial Drainage Act. I am advised that the Office of Public Works has no maintenance responsibility for the erosion of the channel bank at this location.

Freedom of Information

326. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to improve freedom of information legislation. [14998/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): All indications are that the Freedom of Information system continues to function well on a day-to-day basis in delivering its objectives of openness, accountability and transparency of public bodies.

According to the Information Commissioner's Annual Report, 2019 once again saw a new record in FOI activity, with 41,176 requests dealt with by public bodies over the course of the year. This included a further 8% year-on-year increase in the number of requests received by public bodies. The annual volume of FOI requests has almost doubled since the introduction of the current Freedom of Information Act in 2014, while the past decade has seen an increase of 179% in the annual number of requests received by public bodies.

In terms of outcomes, 87% of requests decided on by public bodies in 2019 were granted in full or in part. In only 3% of cases did requesters avail of the review mechanism available to them where dissatisfied with an FOI decision, while only 1% of requesters went on to seek a review by the Information Commissioner. These figures are broadly similar to what has been seen in previous years. The Commissioner also noted a significant decrease in the number of "deemed refusals" coming before him, that is cases where a body failed to issue a decision in time.

My Department continues to monitor the operation of the 2014 Act on an ongoing basis, and is working closely with FOI bodies and other stakeholders to resolve any issues raised.

Ministerial Responsibilities

327. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for the OPW; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15041/20]

328. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for public procurement and eGovernment; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15042/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I propose to take Questions Nos. 327 and 328 together.

There are two Ministers of State appointed to my Department:

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- Deputy Ossian Smyth is Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform with responsibility for Public Procurement and eGovernment; and

- Deputy Patrick O'Donovan is Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform with responsibility for the Office of Public Works.

No formal Delegation of Ministerial Functions Orders have been signed. This position is kept under review in light of the requirements of the respective roles.

Pensions Data

329. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to reconsider the position of his Department in respect of releasing to the public, information on the pension payments of individual former taoisigh and Ministers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15070/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): This question concerns two separate, but related, issues, both of which concern the balance between on the one hand the goal of transparency in public administration, and personal privacy rights on the other.

Firstly, there is the routine publication of individualised information relating to pension payments. Consideration was given to this practice at the time of the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation and it was decided that, on balance and having sought legal advice, it should be discontinued.

Secondly, the Information Commissioner has recently confirmed that pension payments must be treated in the same way as other remuneration to public servants for FOI purposes. Since as early as 2002, the Commissioner's Office has taken the view that while general information, such as the salary scale that applies to a position, can be released under FOI, the precise amount paid to a named individual in a given year is exempt as personal information.

My Department is committed to ensuring transparency to the maximum degree permitted by law. While individualised figures can no longer be published or provided, detailed information such as the aggregate amounts paid to various categories, methods of calculation, and other details are available and allow for thorough scrutiny of my Department's administration of the relevant schemes.

Office of Public Works

330. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the OPW will provide an embankment at a location (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15090/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): 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 area 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.

Tourism Policy

331. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will review the plans for the remainder of the 2020 season in respect of Skellig Mhíchíl, County Kerry in view of the acceleration of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business and the enormous economic boost to south County Kerry that reopening the site to visitors would bring; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15186/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The Office of Public Works is currently in the process of reassessing the position in relation to the Skellig Michael visitor site in light of the changed approach to reopening business and tourist locations which has emerged from Government in the past few weeks.

This review will focus on the Risk analysis which was previously carried out and will assess whether there have been any significant alterations to the position in the meantime which might indicate that a late-season opening could be feasible. OPW is consulting directly with local Boatman interests in the course of this examination as they have a key role in relation to transporting visitors to the island and are responsible for the safety of passengers for that element of the visitor journey.

An outcome to this review is expected by late July and an announcement will be made as to whether an opening is feasible at that stage.

Forensic Science Ireland

332. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if construction on the new forensic science laboratory has started; the timeframe for the completion of the project; and the estimated cost of the project. [15266/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The construction on the new Forensic Science Ireland Laboratory project is being managed by the OPW. The project commenced on site in March 2020 and the construction contract duration is just over 2 years. The construction Contract Value is €79.69m ex vat.

Architectural Heritage

333. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will address a matter regarding a car park (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15320/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Pat-

rick O'Donovan): Ardfert Friary is a National Monument in the ownership of the State. It is located near Ardfert Cathedral which is opened to visitors on a seasonal basis by the Office of Public Works. There are no visitor facilities at the Friary site and, as the access route to the site is not in the sole ownership of the State, public access cannot always be assured.

The Office of Public Works has no information as to why the proposal regarding the development of a carpark at Ardfert Friary did not proceed and there are no plans currently to install such a facility at the site.

Garda Stations

334. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the amounts spent by the OPW on the refurbishment of Santry Garda station in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [15364/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I can confirm that the Office of Public Works (OPW) carried out no major refurbishment works at Santry Garda Station during the years 2018, 2019 and 2020. Ongoing minor works were carried out and details of the expenditure for each of the 3 years is outlined in the table below. These figures are for both works funded by the OPW and An Garda Síochána and include maintenance work, elective projects, the upgrade of mechanical and electrical systems and asbestos removal.

Year	OPW Expenditure	An Garda Síochána Expenditure	Total Expenditure
2018	€135,882.55	€66,726.22	€202,608.77
2019	€128,688.20	€3,029.87	€131,718.07
2020	€44,440.39	€9,120.12	€53,560.51
Total	€309,011.14	€78,876.21	€387,887.35

Public Procurement Contracts

335. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the contractor that will be appointed for the construction of a new Intreo centre in the old library building in Tuam, County Galway (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15406/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The project concerned is the fit out of an office to accommodate Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection staff engaged in Employment Services, Activation, Social Welfare Inspectorate and Community Welfare Services as distinct from an Intreo office. The contract has been placed with Finna Construction Limited.

Office of Public Works

336. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the position regarding a bridge (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15719/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Pat-

rick O'Donovan): The bridge in Caherrevagh, Cloonamealtogue, Shrulce, Co. Mayo, is on the Bridge Maintenance Programme and is scheduled for works 2021, subject to environmental conditions.

Traffic Management

337. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the plans of the OPW to reopen in the near future the Ashton and Islandbridge gates in the Phoenix Park to traffic in view of the fact that the closure is causing serious disruption to residents travelling by necessity in a north to south direction from many neighbourhoods in the Dublin 15 area. [15826/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The Perimeter Gates of the Phoenix Park including the Ashtown Gate and Islandbridge Gate were reopened to vehicular traffic on Friday 10 July.

This decision was based on an increase in the volume of traffic in the neighbouring areas surrounding the Park to which the gate closures have in part contributed. In fact, a further increase in traffic volume in the coming weeks and months with the escalation of the returning workforce within the City and the re-opening of Schools might be anticipated.

I would like to assure the deputy that this Office will continue to evolve its approach to the operations and somewhat complex issues of the Phoenix Park in order to respond, where possible, to the usage patterns of locals and visitors and to ensure that the amenities of this historic park continue to be central to its management approach on a daily basis, where flora and fauna thrive and where visitors' health and wellbeing can be enhanced through experiencing the natural environment in the Park.

Office of Public Works

338. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will liaise with Leitrim County Council to put a fund in place to help stabilise the situation in Drumkeerin in the wake of the recent landslide; if additional funding will be allocated to the council to reinstate the roads affected by the landslide; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15902/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): Under the National Emergency Management Framework responsibility for responding to these events is the statutory responsibility of the relevant local authority.

In relation to the bog slide in the Drumkeeran area assistance in the form of emergency funding to deal with the aftermath of these type of events has, in the recent past, generally come from Government to the relevant local authority through the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, allowing the local authority to procure contractors to undertake the necessary clean up and remedial works. The OPW is in contact with Engineers in Leitrim County Council and providing advice as required.

Departmental Properties

339. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his

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views on a matter regarding lands adjacent to a building (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16107/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The local OPW Regional Office is liaising with Donagh O'Regan, Reeks, Killarney, Co. Kerry in order to clarify the issue and resolve the matter.

Public Inquiries

340. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of tribunals, public investigations and commissions of investigation in process; the length of time each has been under way; when each will conclude; the cost to date of each; and the estimated cost of each at completion. [16138/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has had no tribunals, public investigations or commissions of investigations under its remit since it was established in 2011.

Wildlife Control

341. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will address a matter regarding a seal cull (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14780/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): The two species of seal in Irish waters - the Harbour or Common Seal and the more numerous Grey Seal - are both protected under the EU Habitats Directive and Ireland is obliged to maintain their numbers at a favourable conservation level. We are also required to monitor their populations and report to the European Commission on their conservation status. A standardised monitoring programme has been in place for both species since 2009.

Representatives of the National Parks and Wildlife Service have met with fishermen in Kerry on a number of occasions, most recently on 8 January 2020 in Killarney. Discussions have covered a broad range of issues including current inshore fishing practices and trends, seal predation on fish, seal behaviour and numbers, as well as the by-catch of seals in fishing gear and the management of seal-fishery interactions.

NPWS continues to investigate solutions for deterring seal interactions with static fishing gears and to continue their collaboration with the Marine Institute and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to investigate such problems and their solutions in partnership with the fishing industry.

As part of the overall response to the COVID-19 crisis, staff in my Department are, for the most part, currently working remotely. However, steps were taken early in the crisis to ensure staff remained contactable and they can be contacted by email throughout this period.

Finally, while seals are a protected species, my Department may issue licences to cull individual problem seals, and affected persons can apply for such licences. My Department has no plans to undertake a general cull of seals.

Ministerial Responsibilities

342. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the Minister who has responsibility for the National Parks and Wildlife Service. [14917/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): As the Deputy will be aware the Taoiseach Micheál Martin T.D. has recently announced a reallocation of responsibilities between a number of Government Departments including my own.

As soon as the necessary orders to give effect to these changes are in place, the heritage functions of this Department, which includes the National Parks and Wildlife Service, will transfer to the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government.

Special Areas of Conservation

343. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the steps she will be taking to remedy the persistent failure to designate special areas of conservation under the habitats directive more than five years after the deadline expired in view of the fact the European Commission has now referred Ireland to the Court of Justice of the European Union for breaches of the directive (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15204/20]

344. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the reason EU site-specific conservation objectives have not been established for 87 sites of community importance; and the reason necessary conservation measures have not been established at any of the 423 sites of community importance. [15205/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 343 and 344 together.

My Department has in place a special areas of conservation designation, conservation and management work programme. Under this on-going programme, 276 sites have been designated as special areas of conservation by Statutory Instrument, site specific conservation objectives have been published for 364 special area of conservation sites and site specific conservation measures have been prepared for 53 sites. The Department is working to identify and list necessary conservation measures for each Habitats Directive Annex I habitat and Annex II species on a site-by-site basis. This will include integration of conservation measures already being delivered.

Furthermore, a range of conservation schemes are in place such as the European innovation partnerships, GLAS (green, low-carbon agri-environment scheme) and the native woodland scheme administered by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Farm Plan Scheme administered by the National Parks and Wildlife Service of my Department.

Sites are protected under Irish law from the time they are publicly nominated for designation as special areas of conservation i.e., all 439 special area of conservation sites are protected in accordance with the provisions of the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011.

Invasive Plant Species

345. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the annual budget for rhododendron ponticum clearance in Killarney National Park in each of the years 2000 and 2019, in tabular form. [15219/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): I have asked my officials to collate the information sought for the period in question and I will send it to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Invasive Plant Species

346. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the status of rhododendron ponticum in the previously cleared oak woodlands of Killarney National Park; when the last assessment of the woodlands took place; and if it was carried out by independent scientific experts. [15220/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): The highly invasive non-native weed *Rhododendron ponticum* occurs in low to moderate, or slight to severe, levels throughout previously cleared oak woodlands of Killarney National Park, depending on the classification terminology being used. Higher densities occur in woodlands close to dense infestations where rhododendron has never been cleared, due to seed rain.

Densities of seeding plants varied from 0.3 plants/ha to 18.6 plants/ha (2018 data, the highest density was from a single clump). Data from selected woods is given in the Table below.

Previously cleared woodlands are the subject of ongoing management. Assessment of rhododendron in these woodlands is also ongoing, with ground surveys and drone surveys carried out in many of these woods in November 2017, May and September-October 2018, May 2019 and early March 2020. All these surveys were carried out by independent scientific experts, with the exception of two smaller surveys which were carried out by a graduate student and an NPWS professional.

Estimated densities/ha based on transect surveys in autumn 2018.

Area	Seeding plants/ha
Eagles Nest	1.4
Gortaderaree	0.3
Oak Island	18.6
Bula	3.8
Cahernabane	4.6
Ullauns	10.4
Cromaglan	0.4
Cahnicaun	3.2
Cuckoo Wood	5.6
Brickeen Is.	7.0

Various areas, including some of the above, have been subject to *Rhododendron* control measures since 2018. In particular, specific contracts were undertaken in 2019 to monitor and remove flowering or seed bearing *Rhododendron* plants from a number of areas in Killarney National Park. This is in addition to major contracts to undertake total removal of all *Rhododendron* from locations, including at Eagles Nest, Tomies, Powlagower and Ullauns.

Invasive Plant Species

347. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if there has been an independent scientific review of the rhododendron ponticum clearance meth-

ods currently being used by Killarney National Park; and if those methods have been compared for effectiveness with previous methods employed by a company (details supplied). [15221/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) sought to undertake an expert Peer Review of *Rhododendron ponticum* and the programmes and measures for its control in Killarney National Park. Overseas experts were invited to participate in this independent scientific review. Despite agreement to participate from an independent overseas expert, it has subsequently not proved possible for him to undertake the review. Consequently, the NPWS contracted an expert environmental company to undertake part 1 and 2 of this review. This work is now under way. The NPWS is open, and indeed is expecting, that the review will look at all relevant methods, issues and approaches, including that of the group mentioned by the Deputy.

Invasive Plant Species

348. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the status of the EU formal complaint regarding the Annex I habitat in Killarney National Park and the presence of *rhododendron ponticum*; the steps taken to rectify the issues raised in the formal complaint; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15222/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): An environmental NGO made a complaint to the European Commission in 2017. The Commission made the Department aware of the complaint in July 2018. The Department replied to the Commission in respect of the contents of the complaint in August 2018 and an acknowledgment was received.

In June 2019 on foot of further correspondence from the NGO, the Commission contacted the Department asking for comments thereon. The Department responded to the Commission on the 5th July 2019. The contents were acknowledged and no further correspondence has been received by the Department from the Commission in respect of the matter.

Architectural Heritage

349. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the status of the draft national architecture strategy; and if she will consult the incoming joint Oireachtas committee on housing, local government and heritage at the earliest opportunity on the matter. [15223/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): My Department is currently drafting a new National Policy on Architecture which will support long-term planning strategies and will assist in addressing key issues including societal well-being, climate change and urban regeneration. The adaptation of existing as well as the design of new buildings will, of course, be critical to meet the targets set by the Climate Action Plan 2019.

My Department, supported by a steering committee including officials from the Office of Public Works, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, the Department of Education and Skills, the Health Service Executive, the City and County Architects Association, the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland, the Arts Council, the schools of architecture and the Irish Architecture Foundation, recently completed a public consultation process allowing the opportunity for all communities, stakeholders and citizens to have their say on the proposed new Policy.

The consultation phase considered the main ways in which architecture and our built environment affect society, our health and wellbeing and our ability to prosper. These include climate adaptation and mitigation and sustainable development, the benefits for everyone of obtaining high quality in the built environment, the protection and reuse of our built heritage, ways we can demonstrate built environment leadership and the need to foster education about our built environment. The Department invited online and written submissions, and social media engagement, alongside a series of workshops and meetings, including virtual workshops in line with public health restrictions, to allow wide-ranging involvement in the drafting of the new policy, as well as consideration of the effect of Covid-19 on our built environment.

The Policy will be informed by the feedback we received from the consultation phase, with over 150 submissions, as well as by a review of the previous policy.

It is my intention that a new National Policy on Architecture will play an integral part in implementing our vision for the future, providing policy actions that will encourage best quality in researching, understanding, managing, enhancing and reusing our existing built environment assets as well as delivering sustainable new places and spaces.

I will, of course, be happy to consult with the incoming Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage at the earliest opportunity in relation to the Policy.

National Parks

350. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will address a matter regarding peg holders (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15237/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): It would not be Departmental practice to publish the information sought in details supplied. The use of moorings for fishing/pleasure boats on the lakes in the area in question are subject to a fixed mooring allocation to traditional users. On an annual basis there are 20 pegs available which are subject to a lottery by the area's regional management. This lottery is run in conjunction with, and witnessed by the three local fishing clubs. These pegs are allocated annually for a twelve month period, and this lottery is open to all residents in the State.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

351. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if consideration will be given to financial assistance for aquariums (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15287/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): Under the European Communities (Licensing and Inspection of Zoos) Regulations 2003, my Department has responsibility for the inspection and licensing of zoos and aquariums in the State. The role of my Department is regulatory and its functions do not include the provision of funding or grant aid to zoos or aquariums nor does it have a remit with regard to the day to day management of the zoos. There are currently 68 licensed establishments in the country.

While my Department does not have resources to provide direct financial assistance, the National Parks and Wildlife Service of my Department has been in contact with zoos and aquariums throughout the COVID-19 crisis with the aim of providing any assistance possible and

establishing the issues facing the industry at this time. Officials from the NPWS have also been in frequent contact with BIAZA (British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums), the main representative body of the industry in Ireland as well as the UK.

Cognisant of its role as the regulatory authority for zoos and aquariums in the State, my Department is examining the issues around funding for the sector in the context of the Government's overall response to the difficulties faced by many businesses across all sectors as a result of the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis.

Environmental Investigations

352. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the status of tests carried out in Moanveanlagh Bog in March 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15420/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): As set out in the National Raised Bog Special Areas of Conservation Management Plan 2017-2022, Moanveanlagh Bog Special Area of Conservation is one of the bogs identified for assessment as regards the potential for domestic turf cutting within parts of the site, in accordance with the provisions of article 6.3 of the EU Habitats Directive.

Scientific assessments in that regard were undertaken on the bog by contractors engaged by my Department in March 2019 and May 2019. These assessments concluded that, in a small area within the site, turf cutting there would not have an adverse impact on the (ecological) integrity of the special area of conservation site. Domestic turf cutting could take place there subject to consent being received from the relevant public authority and consultation with the landowner and turbary right holders, if any.

For a larger plot of land within the site, the findings of concentrated geophysical and hydrological investigations indicate that any turf cutting there would require monitoring for an estimated period of a year to assess the level of risk of peat failure (bog burst). In advance of any turf cutting taking place in this area, consent would also be required from the relevant public authority and consultation would have to take place with the landowner and turbary right holders, if any.

It has not been possible to undertake any further scientific investigations within the site due to site access issues. My Department is willing to try to bring a resolution to outstanding issues. If the Deputy feels that he would be able to assist, officials from my Department are available to discuss further.

Departmental Funding

353. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the funding available for 2020 for each heritage function that will be transferred from her Department. [15467/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): It is not possible to answer this question at present as the transfer of functions has not yet occurred therefore there is no agreement on corresponding financial allocations. This question will be proper to the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, when reconfigured, in due course.

Departmental Investigations

354. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will consider conducting an investigation into a possible famine site (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15979/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): I am advised that a granite pillar was brought to the attention of my Department's National Monuments Service as possible evidence of the existence of a famine graveyard at the location in question. However, my Department's view is that the origins and associations of the pillar are unlikely to relate to such burials.

While there is insufficient evidence at this point for the marker to be recorded as an archaeological monument, I understand that my Department has given guidance to the owner of the site, Coillte, and to other interested parties, to assist investigations and to help find out more about it.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

355. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the further steps she plans to take to assist arts businesses which are very seriously affected by Covid-19 to survive financially through the crisis taking into account their importance economically, socially and culturally to Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15664/20]

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Programme for Government contains a commitment that the Government will publish a series of immediate actions to support the economy - the "July Stimulus". In this context the Government will, among other things, consider further additional measures that may be needed to support the tourism and hospitality sector.

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 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 put in place a number of supports for the tourism and hospitality sector. Details of these are available on Fáilte Ireland's website.

My predecessor also established the Tourism Recovery Taskforce on 20th May 2020 to prepare a Tourism Recovery Plan. This 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 Taskforce has submitted an initial report.

Island Communities

356. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the steps she plans to take to reduce the cost of transporting goods to the islands in view of the disproportionate cost associated with freight on purchases by islanders; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14787/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): My Department currently has 11 different contracts in place to transport light and heavy cargo to the off shore islands. Of these contracts, 9 are dedicated solely to the provision of carrying heavy cargo at a cost of €1.3 million per year to the Exchequer. These subsidies are of great benefit to the islanders as they provide a real reduction in the cost of transporting goods to and from the islands which would otherwise be too expensive to transport.

The subsidies provided by my Department also ensure that cargo vessels travel in accordance with agreed schedules to the islands, thus ensuring regularity of service for island communities.

I should also point out that the schedule of charges for the transport of cargo to the islands was reduced significantly by my Department a number of years ago and that these charges have remained largely unchanged since. This initiative has ensured that the real cost of cargo transport has reduced significantly over the past number of years.

Ministerial Responsibilities

357. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will provide a copy of the departmental briefings received by her and each Minister of State in her Department upon taking up each individual role; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14799/20]

363. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht when a copy of the ministerial briefing of her Department will be published. [15260/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 357 and 363 together.

I can confirm to the Deputy that arrangements are being made for the publication on my Department's website of this material.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

358. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the supports that will be available to the arts industry following the difficulties posted by Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14841/20]

371. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if specific funding will be provided for the arts sector due to the severe difficulties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15863/20]

376. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht her priorities to further support artists and performers here; if funding for the arts sector will be reformed to ensure artists, actors and performers have adequate access to Arts Council funding; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15919/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 358, 371 and 376 together.

The Government is aware of the unprecedented impact that the coronavirus is having on business and people's livelihoods and that this impact is likely to be more protracted in the arts

sector.

The Government has extended its two universal income support measures for all sectors. The Pandemic Unemployment Payment, operated by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, has been extended to 10 August. The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), operated by the Revenue Commissioners, has been extended to 31 August and allows employers to retain the link with employees so that when the crisis passes, people can get back to work as quickly and seamlessly as possible.

The Arts Council is the main route through which the Government funds the arts and artists in Ireland. The 2020 allocation to the Council has been increased to €100 million. It includes an additional €20 million allocated last month in recognition of the challenges facing the sector. The Arts Council has indicated that it will allocate the additional funding to bursaries and commissions to artists and arts organisations and these will be coming on stream over the coming weeks and months. Further information is available at the Arts Council's website www.arts council.ie/funding/.

The Government is preparing a July stimulus package which will set out additional supportive measures for a range of sectors to ensure that the economy is in a position to recover rapidly. Details will be announced by Government in due course.

Hare Coursing

359. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will address a matter regarding the future of coursing (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14953/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): The control of live hare coursing, including the operation of individual coursing meetings and managing the use of hares for that activity, is carried out under the Greyhound Industry Act 1958, which is the responsibility of my colleague, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. My responsibility relates to the conservation status of the hare.

While the regulation of hare coursing is not under my statutory control, licences are required by the Irish Coursing Club under the terms of the Wildlife Acts on behalf of their affiliated clubs to facilitate the netting and tagging of hares for closed park meetings. The annual licence to capture and tag hares for the 2019/2020 coursing season was issued by my Department on 9 August last year. The licences granted by my Department in such instances include a range of conditions in relation to coursing hares which are designed to provide as much protection as possible to the conservation status of the hare.

My Department has received an application from the Irish Coursing Club for a licences to capture and tag hares for the forthcoming 2020/21 hare coursing season and a decision will be made on the application in due course.

Waterways Issues

360. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht when service blocks along the River Shannon around Lough Derg will be fully opened by Waterways Ireland. [14997/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): Water-

ways Ireland continues to reopen facilities on the Shannon Navigation based on guidance from Government and relevant health professionals, in order to protect its staff, stakeholders and the wider community. It is aware that the restriction of services and facilities impacts on the ability of users to enjoy the waterways.

All measures are being taken to support the national effort in keeping people safe, protecting staff and everyone who visits or lives on and along the Shannon Navigation.

The Agency will continually review such measures in light of direction and advice from Government and health professionals and any further decisions on service provision will be communicated via the issuance of Marine Notices and will be posted on its website and social media platforms.

As part of its COVID-19 Response Plan, Waterways Ireland has prepared a Roadmap which has been shared externally on its social media platforms. It has indicated that service blocks would remain closed until it is assured it is safe to re-open them. This was predicated on Health & Safety advice from within the Agency taking account of broader public health guidelines.

Waterways Ireland considers service blocks to be potentially high risk infectious areas. Mitigation of this risk, to protect all users, involves increased cleaning routines combining deep cleaning and higher frequency of daily cleaning. There are ten service blocks along the South Shannon (of which four are operated with local authorities – Mount Shannon; Dromineer; Portumna and Coosan) and five directly-managed in the north Shannon. At peak season these are cleaned twice daily.

Following the re-opening of the waterways, the Agency is experiencing record cruise hire bookings in addition to pent-up demand from private boats accessing the waterways in a reduced seasonal window.

Waterways Ireland is working diligently to facilitate user needs whilst managing the risks. Following engagement with users, the Agency has decided to extend its lock opening hours from Monday July 20th 2020.

Waterways Ireland is reviewing its service provisions protocols in relation to the re-opening of service blocks and it is expected this review will be completed by the end of the week.

Ministerial Functions

361. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for the Gaeltacht and sport; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15039/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): As the Deputy will be aware Government Chief Whip, Dara Calleary TD, was appointed Minister of State for the Gaeltacht, the Irish language and Sport by An Taoiseach Mícheál Martin on Wednesday 1st July.

I look forward to working closely with Minister of State Calleary to progress the broad remit of the Department.

Arrangements for the transfer of Ministerial functions, including the delegation of specific functions to Ministers of State are being put in place and will be completed over the coming weeks.

Departmental Bodies

362. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the offices and agencies under the remit of her Department. [15259/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): As the Deputy will be aware the Taoiseach, Mícheál Martin T.D. has recently announced a reallocation of responsibilities between a number of Government Departments including my own.

Pending the making of the necessary orders to give effect to these changes, the details of the offices and agencies currently under the remit of my Department are available from the following links on my Department's website:

Offices

www.chg.gov.ie/about/organisation-structure/.

Agencies

www.chg.gov.ie/about/organisation-structure/agencies-bodies-under-the-departments-aegis/.

This is the current situation, pending completion of the formal transfer of functions which are currently taking place between Departments. Once formal transfer of functions has been completed, the Department's website will be updated accordingly.

Question No. 363 answered with Question No. 357.

Departmental Funding

364. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the status of the scéim pobal Gaeilge funding for County Mayo and rest of the country in view of the fact that there is concern regarding the proposed reorganising of the scheme. [15336/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): Foras na Gaeilge has been administering Scéim Pobal Gaeilge since 2005, to assist voluntary committees in promoting the Irish language in the community on an all-island basis.

I have been informed by Foras na Gaeilge that the consultation process regarding the proposed restructuring of the current scheme is still ongoing and will be until 17th July 2020. The final proposals regarding the new scheme will have to be agreed in due course by the sponsoring Departments – that is, my own Department and the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland.

I would like to encourage all communities involved in SPG to communicate their views regarding the restructuring of the scheme to Foras na Gaeilge under the consultation process.

In relation to County Mayo, Coiste Duíche Mhaigh Eo is being funded under the current scheme and I understand that the current contract, which was due to expire on 30 June 2020, has been extended until the application process under the new scheme is completed.

Freedom of Information

365. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the number of requests submitted under freedom of information legislation to her Department in each of the years 2009 to 2019; the average initial estimated cost of FOI requests in each of the years; the quantity and value of estimated costs that were in excess of the overall maximum fee in each year; the quantity of requests in each year pursued by the applicant after having been provided with an initial estimated cost; and the average fee paid by applicants that received information from her Department under FOI legislation in each year, in tabular form (details supplied). [15465/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): My Department in its current configuration was established on 2nd June 2011 bringing together functions previously under the remit of three different Departments.

Details of the number of FOI Requests received by my Department and the charging provisions applicable to such requests are available on my Department's website at www.chg.gov.ie.

Charges, if any, arising in the case of individual FOI requests are dependent on the nature of the request received. It is the policy of my Department to seek to assist requesters in minimizing or eliminating costs where possible with a view to ensuring efficiency in the operation of the FOI legislation to the mutual benefit of the requester and the Department.

Following a review of FOI requests received during the period specified the information requested by the Deputy is set out in the table below.

Year	Requests	Cases where Fees estimated	Avg Est Costs	Cases where fees paid	Avg Fees Paid	Cases where Est. Fees above Limit	Avg value where Est. Fees above Limit	Notes
2011	34	1	€158	1	€158	0	€0	None
2012	69	9	€134	4	€83	0	€0	Five Requests withdrawn by Requester
2013	56	3	€1,113	1	€63	1	€3,226	Excess Fees waived by Department on appeal. One other request refined and fees reduced.
2014	84	4	€246	2	€84	0	€0	2 Requests withdrawn.

Year	Requests	Cases where Fees estimated	Avg Est Costs	Cases where fees paid	Avg Fees Paid	Cases where Est. Fees above Limit	Avg value where Est. Fees above Limit	Notes
2015	163	15	€483	2	€213	6	€770	Six requests refined and no charges applied. Seven requests withdrawn.
2016	169	10	€606	1	€200	5	€928	Six requests refined and no charges applied. Three requests withdrawn.
2017	158	10	€411	1	€120	2	€700	Five requests refined, four with no charges applied. Four requests withdrawn. One request refused.
2018	242	7	€428	1	€298	1	€800	Four requests refined and no charges applied. Two requests withdrawn.

Year	Requests	Cases where Fees estimated	Avg Est Costs	Cases where fees paid	Avg Fees Paid	Cases where Est. Fees above Limit	Avg value where Est. Fees above Limit	Notes
2019	225	6	€272	0	€0	0	€0	Two requests refined and no charges applied. Three requests withdrawn. One under appeal.

Archaeological Sites

366. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the status of an application by a group (details supplied). [15647/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): I understand that an application for a licence for archaeological excavations has been received in my Department in this case and that certain particulars have been requested from the applicant. I am advised that, on receipt of these particulars, the Department would expect to be in a position to issue the licence.

Seirbhísí agus Tacaíochtaí Gaeilge

367. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den an Aire Cultúir, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta cén fáth gur campaí samhraidh amuigh faoin spéir amháin atá ceadaithe ag an Roinn i mbliana, go mór mór ag togáil san áireamh na háiseanna breátha pobail atá ar fáil ar fud na Gaeltachta agus an drochaimsir atá coitianta in Éirinn; an raibh sé seo bunaithe ar chomhairle sláinte phroifisiúnta; má bhí, an bhfuil sí sásta an chomhairle seo a fhoilsíú; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [15659/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): De thradh na paindéime, bhí sé idir dhá cheann na meá an mbeifí in ann dul ar aghaidh le reáchtáil campaí samhraidh sa Ghaeltacht i mbliana. Tar éis an cheist a bheith cíortha go cúramach ag an Roinn le páirtithe leasmhara eile, tógadh an cinneadh go bhféadfaí dul ar aghaidh le campaí faoin aer amháin agus cuireadh é sin in iúl do Mhuintearas, fóchomhlacht de chuid Údarás na Gaeltachta, a dhéanann riar ar an scéim, ar 1 Iúil. Ina theannta sin, ar ndóigh, tá roinnt srianta eile iarrtha orthu a chur i bhfeidhm chomh maith ar mhaithe le cúram a dhéanamh de shláinte díobh siúd a bheidh ag freastal ar champaí agus ina bhfeighil chomh maith.

Níor mhiste a lua go deimhin gur iarradh ar Mhuintearas prótocal Covid a chur faoi bhráid na Roinne/an Údaráis sular tógadh an cinneadh agus gur mar chuid den phótocal sin a mhol an eagraíocht gur campaí faoin aer amháin a bheadh aitheanta an samhradh seo.

Is féidir leis an Teachta a bheith cinnte de go leanfaidh mo Roinn ag cur sláinte an phobail chun tosaigh thar aon ní eile sna cúinsí reatha.

Agus campaí samhraidh 2020 faoi chaibidil, dírim aird an Teachta ar an dá shraith teilifíse laethúil atá á gcráoladh faoi láthair ag TG4; Campaí Cúla4 a thosaigh ar 29 Meitheamh agus atá á chraoladh le tacaíocht mo Roinne agus Foras na Gaeilge agus ina theannta sin, Cúl Camps a chraoltar i gcomhar le CLG/Kellogs.

Architectural Heritage

368. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if she will introduce a new grant scheme to support the renovation of old and derelict farmhouses or other buildings in rural areas; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15701/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): My Department provides financial support for the protection of heritage buildings and historic structures through two grant schemes which are, in the main, administered by the local authorities. These are the Built Heritage Investment Scheme (BHIS) and the Historic Structures Fund (HSF), both of which accept applications for conservation works to eligible farmhouses and other buildings in rural areas.

This year 450 heritage projects across every county in the country will benefit from a combined sum of over €4.3m under these schemes. This funding will support the owners and custodians of historic and protected structures as they carry out hundreds of small-scale, labour-intensive projects to repair and safeguard our built heritage as well as providing vital support for local jobs in conservation, traditional skills and construction. Details of all projects approved for 2020 are published on my Department's website as well as on each local authority website.

In addition, the Heritage Council, which is an agency of my Department, in partnership with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, manages the Green Low-Carbon Agri-Environment Scheme (GLAS) for traditional farm buildings. The principal objective of this scheme is to ensure that traditional farm buildings and other related structures that contribute to the character of the landscape, and which are of significant heritage value, are conserved for active agricultural use. Grant amounts under this scheme vary between €4,000 and €25,000. I understand that the 2020 scheme closed for applications on 18th February, but further information can be sought from the Heritage Council directly.

While the primary responsibility to care for and maintain a protected structure rests with the owner, these schemes invest essential capital in our valuable built heritage and help the owners and custodians of historic structures in every local authority area across the country to safeguard their properties into the future for the benefit of communities.

Covid-19 Pandemic

369. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if the events industry can expect guidelines on best practice for events in view of physical distancing; and if so, when they can expect to receive such guidelines. [15726/20]

370. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the actions she plans to take following the meeting with art workers and freelance technicians represented by an organisation (details supplied). [15862/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 369 and 370 together.

The Government is aware of the unprecedented impact that the coronavirus is having on business and people's livelihoods and particularly on the event industry. The Government operates two universal supports for all sectors.

- The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, (TWSS) operated by the Revenue Commissioners, has been extended to 31 August 2020. The TWSS allows employers to retain the link with employees so that when this crisis passes, people can get back to work as quickly and seamlessly as possible.

- The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is operated by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. The PUP has been extended to 10 August 2020.

The third phase of lifting the public health restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of the coronavirus took effect from 29 June 2020, when museums, galleries, theatres, concert halls and other cultural outlets were allowed to reopen. Phase 4 of the Roadmap for reopening society and business is due to commence on 20 July, subject to government approval. If it proceeds as planned, pubs, bars and casinos can re-open and gatherings of up to 100 people indoors and 500 outdoors will be permissible.

Reopening is subject to the Phase 3 and Phase 4 restrictions on numbers public health advice on social distancing. As the country continues to reopen, every step will be guided by scientific evidence and public health advice, including in relation to any restrictions in place. Updates to the roadmap can be found at www.gov.ie.

Before re-opening, every business and organization must prepare its own re-opening plan as laid down in the National Return to Work Safely Protocol to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures. Further guidance is available from the Health and Safety Authority as the lead agency in overseeing compliance with the National Return to Work Safely Protocol in the workplace. The HSA Helpline can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or wcu@hsa.ie.

My Department has responsibility for initiatives specific to the tourism sector and events and festivals. To this end, a Tourism Recovery Taskforce was set up 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. Full details including updates may be accessed at this link www.gov.ie/en/publication/8f914-tourism-recovery-taskforce-news-and-updates/.

Fáilte Ireland recently published guidelines for the tourism sector in line with the Government's Roadmap and which were prepared in consultation with the tourism industry and relevant authorities. These guidelines are intended to assist tourism businesses meet requirements in line with the Return to Work Safely protocol and based on the latest health advice. The report can be accessed at this link. <https://covid19.failteireland.ie/business-supports/business-reopening/activity-providers/guidelines-for-reopening/>.

The Government is preparing a July stimulus package which will set out additional supportive measures for a range of sectors to ensure that the economy is in a position to recover rapidly. Details will be announced by Government in due course.

Question No. 371 answered with Question No. 358.

14 July 2020

Foras na Gaeilge

372. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den an Aire Cultúir, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta an bhfuil i gceist aici méadu a dhéanamh ar mhaoiniú Fhoras na Gaeilge le gur féidir leis an bhForas a chuid a dhéanamh maidir le forbairt na teanga mar theanga phobail faoin Straitéis Fiche Bliain don Ghaeilge; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [15864/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): Is í an Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh Theas (CATT) a cheadaíonn na buiséid do na Forais Trasteorann uile, An Foras Teanga san áireamh. Mar gheall ar chúinsí polaitiúla i dTuaisceart Éireann, áfach, níorbh fhéidir cruinnithe CATT a eagrú ó lár 2016 i leith. Dá bhrí sin, cé nach bhfuil na buiséid i leith 2017 go 2020 ceadaithe go hoifigiúil go fóill, ó 2017 i leith, tá aontaithe ag na Ranna Airgeadais sa dá dhlínse go bhfeidhmeodh na Forais Trasteorann uile de réir na buiséid a cheadaigh an CATT ina leith don bhliain 2016.

I mbliana, íocfaidh mo Roinn €11,087,184 (75% den ollbhuiséad ceadaithe ag CATT) d'Fhoras na Gaeilge. Anuas air sin, cuirfidh mo Roinn maoiniú breise ar fáil d'Fhoras na Gaeilge i ndáil le nithe imfhálaithe mar a bhaineann le Clár na Leabhar Gaeilge (€1,061,165) agus Colmceille (€118,519). Is fiú a nótáil freisin go ligtear d'Fhoras na Gaeilge an t-ioncam breise a ghintear ó dhíol leabhar agus eile a choinneáil le caitheamh ar a chuid gníomhaíochtaí.

Agus an CATT ag feidhmiú arís, déanfar na buiséad 2017 - 2020 a cheadú go foirmeálta agus beidh deis ann gach gné de chúrsaí oibre an Fhoras Teanga a phlé, cúrsaí buiséid do 2021 san áireamh.

Covid-19 Pandemic

373. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den an Aire Cultúir, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta an dtógfar mná tí a bhí le scoláirí a choinneáil faoi scéim na bhfoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge den chéad uair i mbliana san áireamh sa scéim cúitimh atá ar fáil do na mná tí de bharr Covid 19; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [15865/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): Mar is eol don Teachta, fógraíodh le gairid ciste éigeandála aon uaire ar fiú €4.7m chun tacú le cobhsú earnáil na gcoláistí samhraidh Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht.

Is beart aon uaire é a bhfuil mar aidhm aige inmharthanacht leanúnach na hearnála a chinntiú agus dá réir, ligean don earnáil leanúint ar aghaidh chun cur leis an iarracht chórasach atá á déanamh chun tacú leis an nGaeilge agus leis na réigiúin Ghaeltachta de réir chuspóirí uileghabhálacha an Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge 2010–2030 agus an Plean Gníomhaíochta 2018–2022 lena mbaineann.

Faoin gciste cobhsaithe atá fógartha, cuirfear tacaíocht ar fiú suas le €3.1m é i dtreo údaráis na gcoláistí le cur ar a gcumas táillí/éarlais a aisíoc le tuismitheoirí agus cuirfear €1.6m ar fáil chun tacú leis an 700 teaghlach Gaeltachta incháilithe a chuireann lóistín deimhnithe ar fáil dóibh siúd a fhreastalaíonn ar cheann de na 42 coláiste samhraidh Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht a bhfuil aitheantas acu faoin scéim.

Tagann an tionscnamh seo tar éis gur fhógair mo Roinn ar an 20 Aibreán 2020 nach reáchtálfáí aon chúrsa foghlama Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht an samhradh seo de bharr na paindéime Covid-19, ar mhaithe le sláinte phoiblí a chosaint.

Is é an ráta caighdeánach a bheidh iníoctha i leith lóistín ná suas le 40% den íocaíocht laeth-

úil a bhíonn iníoctha ag mo Roinn go hiondúil faoin scéim (ie €10 an scoláire do na teaghlaigh), is é sin €4 an scoláire an oíche do na teaghlaigh cháilithe atá aitheanta ag mo Roinn.

Beidh iomlán na híocaíochta do gach teaghlach bunaithe ar líon na scoláirí ar íocadh Scéim na bhFoghlaimoirí Gaeilge ina leith don tréimhse ó Aibreán go Lúnasa 2019.

Is féidir le teaghlaigh nach raibh páirteach i Scéim na bhFoghlaimoirí Gaeilge in 2019 iarratas a dhéanamh faoin gciste agus, ach an t-iarratas a bheith bailí, beidh an íocaíocht faoin scéim bunaithe ar an líon foghlaimoirí a bhí i gceist ag an gcoláiste a chur ar iostas leis an teaghlach in 2020. Déanfaidh an Coláiste an líon foghlaimoirí seo a dheimhniú don Roinn. Ní thabharfar aitheantas sa chás seo, áfach, d'aon teaghlach nua a bhfuarthas iarratas ar aitheantas uathu tar éis 1 Aibreán 2020.

Anuas air sin, dóibh siúd a raibh foghlaimoirí Gaeilge le bheith ar iostas leo den chéad uair in 2020, is féidir leo iarratais ar chúnamh breise d'iarratasóirí nua a dhéanamh chomh maith i.e., deontas aon uaire €2,000 (nó 50% den chostas, cibé acu is lú) i leith na gcostas a thit orthu maidir le oibreacha/ábhar a bhaineann le sábháilteacht dóiteáin.

National Parks

374. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if her attention has been drawn to the recent destruction in the Mealagh Valley, County Cork; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15894/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): Officials of the National Parks and Wildlife Service of my Department investigated an incident in Mealagh Valley, Bantry, Co. Cork in relation to potential breaches of the Wildlife Acts. As the matter is still subject to a live investigation by my Department I am not in a position to comment further at this time.

There are a number of other agencies who may have an interest in the works carried out at this site and it is my understanding that both Inland Fisheries Ireland and Cork County Council have also made visits to the site.

Crime Data

375. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the number of prosecutions relating to wildlife crimes under the Wildlife Acts 1976 to 2012 and the European Communities Birds and Natural Habitats Regulations 2011 from January 2014 to May 2020, inclusive, in tabular form. [15895/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): The number of successful prosecution cases taken by my Department in the period 2014 to date in 2020 under the Wildlife Acts and the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 to 2015 is set out in tabular form below. These prosecutions cover various types of offences ranging from the persecution of badgers, illegal hunting of deer species, illegal hunting of hares with packs of dogs generally known as lurchers, poisoning of raptor species and the illegal cutting of hedges and clearance of vegetation.

Year	Number of successful prosecution cases
2014	5

Year	Number of successful prosecution cases
2015	13
2016	11
2017	8
2018	8
2019	21
2020	12 to date

Question No. 376 answered with Question No. 358.

Commemorative Events

377. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht if the National Famine Commemoration will take place on the third Sunday in May 2021 in Bun-crana, County Donegal. [16032/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): I would refer the Deputy to the response of my predecessor Minister Madigan to Parliamentary Question No. 943 of 23 June 2020 and Parliamentary Question No. 1272 of 3 June 2020, in which she confirmed that the National Famine Commemoration Day is due to be held in May 2021, in Bun-crana, Co. Donegal.

Officials of my Department and Donegal County Council will resume preparations for the 2021 event later in the year. Further announcements in relation to the details of the arrangements for the National Famine Commemoration Day 2021 will be made in due course.

Public Inquiries

378. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the number of tribunals, public investigations and commissions of investigations in process; the length of time each has been under way; when each will conclude; the cost to date of each; and the estimated cost of each at completion. [16143/20]

Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): I am advised that there are no tribunals, public investigations and commissions of investigations currently open in respect of my Department.

Commercial Rates

379. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government when the three-month rates waiver scheme for businesses forced to shut due to the Covid-19 crisis announced on 2 May 2020 will be introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14926/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Programme for Government - Our Shared Future, commits to reviewing the treatment of commercial rates for the remainder of the year, as a priority action. This process is underway in my Department in the context of the forthcoming July stimulus. The previously announced waiver forms part of this consideration, with a view to a single communication with local authorities and ratepayers in the near future.

Planning Issues

380. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he will review restrictions on planning permissions for dwellings on the national secondary road network in instances in which the proposed dwelling would be located in an area of reduced speed limit such as 80 km/h (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15171/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I understand that the Deputy may be referring to the Spatial Planning and National Roads Guidelines 2012 issued by the then Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government under Section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended. The Guidelines were prepared in consultation with the Department of Transport Tourism and Sport, local authorities and the National Roads Authority (NRA - now Transport Infrastructure Ireland - TII).

Planning authorities are required to have regard to the Guidelines in the performance of their functions under the Planning and Development Act 2000. The Guidelines set out planning policy considerations relating to development affecting national roads (including motorways, national primary and national secondary roads) outside the 50-60 kmh speed limit zones for cities, towns and villages.

The Guidelines state that local authority Development Plans must include policies which seek to maintain and protect the safety, capacity and efficiency of national roads and associated junctions, avoiding the creation of new accesses and the intensification of existing accesses to national roads where a speed limit greater than 50 km per hour applies. Planning authorities must also ensure that they consult with TII in preparing any local area plans or other non-statutory plans where there may be material implications for national roads. I would also note that planning authorities are strongly recommended to identify, as part of the development plan process, those stretches of non-national roads outside the 50-60 kmh speed limit zones where it would also be appropriate to apply the Guidelines.

The Guidelines do state that, in certain circumstances, planning authorities may identify stretches of national secondary roads where a less restrictive approach may be applied as part of the process of reviewing or varying the relevant development plan. This includes the form and suitability of development, the volume of traffic to be generated and the implications for safety, capacity and efficient operation of national roads including any future upgrades and consistency with other planning guidelines issued under section 28 of the Act such as the Retail Planning Guidelines 2012 and Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines 2005.

Housing for People with Disabilities

381. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if the necessary works can be completed in the property of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15290/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Administration of the Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability, including the assessment, approval and payment of individual grants to applicants, is the responsibility of the relevant local authority. I understand that the local authority in question is awaiting the submission of cost estimates in order to progress the referenced application further.

Social Welfare Offices

382. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if local social welfare offices and staff are exempt from the payment of rates; the local authorities that operate under this premise; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15299/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): 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 2001-2019. 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.

Water Supply

383. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of lead connections as determined by the Environmental Protection Agency that require replacing by county and available smaller geographical unit in tabular form. [15709/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): With effect from 1 January 2014, Irish Water has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels including the delivery of water services capital infrastructure, while the local authorities remain responsible for private water supplies.

Lead in drinking water is both the responsibility of water suppliers and property owners. Irish Water is responsible for lead pipework in the public water distribution network. This is known as public-side lead. Lead plumbing in buildings and within property boundaries is a matter for the property owner. This is known as private-side lead.

In May 2017 Irish Water estimated that lead pipework existed in approximately 180,000 residential properties in Ireland as well as in many commercial and public buildings. While there are no lead water mains in Ireland, service connections within properties can contain traces of lead. The vast majority of lead pipes are contained within properties built up to and including the 1970s.

A National Strategy to Reduce Exposure to Lead in Drinking Water was published in June 2015. In response to the recommendations of this strategy, Irish Water prepared a detailed Lead in Drinking Water Mitigation Plan to identify measures to mitigate the risks to human health posed by the presence of lead in drinking water. The Plan proposes to remove all public lead service connection pipes over a ten year programme (i.e. by the end of 2026).

Irish Water have also put in place an interim water treatment programme to protect consumers from lead exposure while this replacement programme is implemented. According to the recent EPA report, Drinking Water Quality in Public Supplies 2019, by the end of 2019 17% of all public side lead connections had been replaced.

My Department has introduced a grant scheme to assist owners of premises connected to a domestic water supply with the costs of replacing lead piping or related fittings located within the internal distribution system of the premises, as defined in the Water Services Act 2007. The grant is administered by local authorities and information on how to apply for this grant is available from the relevant authority and on my Department's website at the following link: https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/leaflet_-_grant_to_replace_lead_pipes_and_fittings.pdf.

Since 1 January 2014, Irish Water has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels. Further detail in relation to the extent of lead within the public network should be sought from Irish Water. Irish Water has established a dedicated team to deal with representations and queries from public representatives. The team can be contacted via email to oireachtasmembers@water.ie or by telephone on a dedicated number, 1890 578 578.

Commercial Property

384. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the action and steps he will take regarding commercial premises in town centres in circumstances in which the owners are refusing to lease or sell the premises, yet continue to avail of rate reductions, negatively impacting surrounding businesses. [15999/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Local authorities are under a statutory obligation to levy rates on the occupiers of rateable property in accordance with the details entered in the valuation lists prepared by the independent Commissioner of Valuation under the Valuation Acts 2001 to 2015.

Legislative provision is made for the refund of rates paid on vacant commercial properties in certain circumstances. The Local Government Act 1946 provides that where a property is unoccupied on the date of the making of the rate, the owner becomes liable for rates. However, the owner is entitled to a refund if the property is vacant for specified purposes, these being if the premises are unoccupied for the purpose of additions, alterations or repairs; where the owner is bona fide unable to obtain a suitable tenant at a reasonable rent; and where the premises are vacant pending redevelopment. The collection of rates and the determination of eligibility for a refund in this context are matters for each individual local authority.

The Local Government Act 1946 provided that the owner was entitled to a 100% refund in most local authority areas. Separate legislation governed refunds in the cities of Dublin, Limerick and Cork, where the same criteria for refunds applied but only 50% of the rates paid were refundable. With effect from 1 June 2014, when the relevant provision commenced, the Local Government Reform Act 2014 gives discretion to the elected members of individual local authorities to vary the level of rates refunds that apply in individual local electoral areas within the authority's administrative area. The Local Government (Financial and Audit Procedures) Regulations 2014 provide that the decision to alter the rate of refund should be taken at the annual budget meeting and that the rate of refund decided in respect of the relevant local electoral area, shall apply to eligible persons for the year to which the budget relates. The absence of a decision to vary the refund means that the existing legislative provisions regarding the rate

of refunds apply (either 100% or 50% as set out above). Guidance has been provided to local authorities and elected members in that regard. A decision to vary the level of rate refund applying is a reserved function of elected members of a local authority.

The Local Government Rates and Other Matters Act 2019 modernised the legislation governing commercial rates and contains provision for schemes for the abatement of rates on vacant properties. The Act provides that a local authority may provide a temporary abatement for vacant properties, subject to any maximum relief which may be specified by the Minister, to ensure that all property owners (other than those whose rates liability would be below a de minimis threshold) make some level of payment to the local authority. The Act allows the Minister to prescribe that the maximum level of relief can be further reduced by individual local authorities. Currently, only the sections of the Act relating to the amendment of the Rate Limitation Order have been commenced. Commencement of the remaining elements of the Act is under consideration, and it had been intended that the bulk of the provisions would be operational for the 2021 local authority budget cycle, in November 2020. However, commencement is likely to be delayed by several months due to the impact of the COVID crisis.

Social and Affordable Housing

385. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if the income eligibility limits for social housing in areas such as counties Cavan and Monaghan will be reviewed as a matter of urgency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14643/20]

412. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government when the review of income thresholds to qualify for a place on a local authority housing list will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15321/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 385 and 412 together.

Applications for social housing support are assessed by the relevant local authority, in accordance with the eligibility and need criteria set down in section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011, as amended.

The 2011 Regulations prescribe maximum net income limits for each local authority, in different bands according to the area concerned, with income being defined and assessed according to a standard Household Means Policy. The 2011 Regulations do not provide local authorities with any discretion to exceed the limits that apply to their administrative areas.

Under the Household Means Policy, which applies in all local authorities, net income for social housing assessment is defined as gross household income less income tax, PRSI, Universal Social Charge and Pension-Related Deductions within the meaning of Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act 2009. The Policy provides for a range of income disregards, and local authorities also have discretion to decide to disregard income that is temporary, short-term or once-off in nature.

The income bands are expressed in terms of a maximum net income threshold for a single-person household, with an allowance of 5% for each additional adult household member, subject to a maximum allowance under this category of 10%; and 2.5% for each child, subject to a maximum allowance under this category of 10%.

The income bands and the authority area assigned to each band were based on an assessment of the income needed to provide for a household's basic needs, plus a comparative analysis of the local rental cost of housing accommodation across the country. It is important to note that the limits introduced at that time also reflected a blanket increase of €5,000 introduced prior to the new system coming into operation, in order to broaden the base from which social housing tenants are drawn, both promoting sustainable communities and also providing a degree of future-proofing.

Given the cost to the State of providing social housing, it is considered prudent and fair to direct resources to those most in need of social housing support. The current income eligibility requirements generally achieve this, providing for a fair and equitable system of identifying those households facing the greatest challenge in meeting their accommodation needs from their own resources.

However, as part of the broader social housing reform agenda, a review of income eligibility for social housing supports in each local authority area is underway. The review will also have regard to current initiatives being brought forward in terms of affordability and cost rental and will be completed when the impacts of these parallel initiatives have been considered.

Local Authority Funding

386. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if his attention has been drawn to the financial challenges of Cork City and County councils; and if he is considering direct financial support in view of the loss of key income streams. [14658/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I intend to continue to support measures taken by my Department to assist local authorities, including Cork City and Cork County Councils, with the financial challenges they are experiencing since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

At the outset and to minimise cash flow challenges, my Department arranged for the early payment of Local Property Tax (LPT) to all local authorities. As a short term measure, €136m was made available to local authorities as cash flow support in early April, in order to ensure that vital services that local authorities deliver can be maintained. This support was comprised of the early payment of the LPT allocation ordinarily paid from the Local Government Fund in May and July. Further to these measures, my Department arranged for the payment of 50% of each local authority's individual Payroll and PSPR allocation, amounting to €54.8m, in mid June. This interim payment would ordinarily be paid later in July.

On 2 May 2020, a waiver of commercial rates was announced for businesses that were forced to close due to public health requirements, from 27 March 2020, for a three-month period. The administration by local authorities of this measure will be by way of a credit in lieu of commercial rates. The approved Programme for Government – Our Shared Future, commits to setting out how commercial rates will be treated for the remainder of 2020, as a priority action for the new Government. This is under active consideration in the context of the July stimulus.

In addition to the challenges faced from Covid-19 there are financial implications to the two authorities arising from the boundary alteration between Cork City Council and Cork County Council. The Local Government Act 2019, which provided for the boundary alteration, also provided for a financial settlement to be agreed jointly by the local authorities in accordance with a statutory Implementation Plan. The financial settlement is made up of two parts; an an-

nual contribution, and a financial adjustment that caters for future adjustments. The annual contribution methodology has been agreed between the two authorities, and is currently the subject of independent audit and verification. The financial adjustment is also close to agreement and I expect to have final confirmation of agreement in the coming weeks.

A separate provision in the Local Government Act 2019 provided for a recoupment to Cork City Council in respect of income incurred from May 2019 to December 2019. The transfer of administrative responsibility caused by the boundary alteration took place on May 2019. Financial responsibility did not transfer until 1 January 2020. The city took over full responsibility for the delivery of services on 31 May 2019, but the county continued to be the rating authority until the end of 2019. Agreement on the amount to be recouped is also expected in the coming weeks.

Energy Efficiency

387. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the details of a planned retrofit scheme to be rolled out by his Department to assist homeowners in improving the energy efficiency of older homes. [14674/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department has been providing funding support under the Social Housing Insulation Retrofitting Programme to local authorities since 2013, for insulation and energy efficiency works to their social housing stock.

The programme is implemented in two phases: Phase 1 is a shallow retrofit and ensures that the entire social housing stock has, as a minimum, cavity wall and attic insulation. Phase 2 is a deep retrofit and focuses on the fabric upgrade works to those dwellings with solid/hollow block wall construction and also provides for replacement windows/doors as well as heating upgrades (including upgrades to boilers, or a heat pump to replace the existing boiler).

To date €151m in Exchequer funding has been provided with over 72,000 social housing homes benefiting from upgrades. A more detailed breakdown of this expenditure is set out on my Department's website at the following link: <https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/energy-efficiencyretrofitting/energy-efficiency-retrofitting-programme>.

Funding support will continue in 2020 for this programme from a budget of €25million, with local authorities selecting their properties for inclusion in the programme and determining the works that are necessary.

As part of the Just Transition proposals for the midlands region, Budget 2020 made provision for €20 million to fund energy efficiency upgrades to local authority houses in the affected counties as a pilot programme. The programme is designed to explore an alternative approach to the upgrade of the social housing stock and also aims to group housing upgrades together so that opportunities for retrofitting will arise for private housing with support from the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI).

This Programme is being developed under a Retrofit Taskforce and as well as my Department, the preparatory work also involves the Department of Communications, Climate Action & Environment and the SEAI. All involved are working with the relevant local authorities to advance retrofitting in areas of sufficient concentration of local authority housing requiring energy upgrades.

Significant preparatory work has been completed to date, including a framework for the

retrofit works and the identification by the local authorities of their selected areas of housing to be retrofitted. However, the cessation of many construction-related activities due to Covid has had a significant impact on the work of the local authorities on this programme as essential preparatory work to survey local authority homes for the retrofit works was affected.

The adoption by the County and City Management Association (CCMA) of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for internal work to housing, has allowed the surveying work to proceed and as this is completed, it is expected that the retrofit works will commence on some local authority homes in August.

As set out in the Programme for Government, a national retrofitting scheme is due to be rolled out in 2021. The midlands pilot along with other pilot schemes which are due to commence rollout in early 2021, will be used to test key elements of the national plan.

The national retrofitting scheme will be managed by a newly designated National Retrofitting Delivery Body which is to be in place by the end of 2020.

Local Authority Functions

388. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if grant funding will be provided to enable the live streaming of local authority meetings (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14714/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Section 45(5) of the Local Government Act 2001 states that a local authority may, by standing orders, regulate the right of members of the public and members of the media to be present at meetings. This includes the making of rules in relation to recording or relaying the proceedings as they take place or at a later stage.

It is therefore a matter for the elected members of each local authority to decide in the first instance to webcast local authority meetings and then to allocate sufficient funding from their annual budget for the provision of such facilities.

However, I recognise the potential in the use of technology to strengthen local democracy, leadership and governance.

The Programme for Government Our Shared Future states that “the new Government is committed to making local government stronger, more accountable and more responsive to the communities it serves”. The Programme for Government also has a commitment to “implement the Moorhead Report on the Role and Remuneration of Local Authority Elected Members within 12 months”. One of the Report’s recommendations is that live streaming should be implemented in all local authorities to ensure full transparency of proceedings at council meetings. My Department is now considering this matter in the context of the Report’s implementation.

Planning Investigations

389. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he will publish the report into alleged planning irregularities in County Donegal; and the action he plans to take on foot of the findings of the report. [14786/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I will be examining this report and will bring this matter to Government for consideration in due

course.

In this regard, the decisions of the Commissioner for Environmental Information (CEI/18/0019) of 13 February 2019 and the Information Commissioner (OIC-59426-Q8D7T8) of 27 February 2020 in relation to requests to publish this report will also be taken into account. Both decisions are publicly available on those bodies' websites.

Ministerial Responsibilities

390. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he will provide a copy of the Departmental briefings received by him and each Minister of State in his Department upon taking up each individual role; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14806/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The brief that was prepared for me upon taking up my role was also provided to the Ministers of State when they were appointed to the Department.

It is my intention to publish the briefing paper, subject to any redactions made in line with the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2014. The brief will be available on the Department's website shortly and we will advise the Deputy when it is available.

Planning Issues

391. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if a decision has been made on a developer-provided infrastructure application for an estate (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14818/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): 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 to date.

I expect that the Expert Panel will make recommendations to me shortly 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 the coming weeks.

Planning Issues

392. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government

his plans to positively change planning legislation in the months ahead. [14912/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Programme for Government – Our Shared Future (2020), identifies the following specific legislative reforms in the wider planning area:

- drafting a General Scheme of a new Planning and Development Bill providing for the introduction of a ‘use it or lose it’ condition for all planning applications of ten housing units or more;

- review and reform the judicial review process so that such reforms come into effect upon the establishment of the Environmental and Planning Law Court, while also adhering to our EU law obligations under the Aarhus Convention;

- progression of the development of primary legislation in relation to the Land Development Agency; and

- drafting the Marine Planning and Development Management Bill, which will introduce a new marine planning regime to replace the existing State and development consent regimes in the marine area and streamline arrangements on the basis of a single consent principle.

The progression of these legislative proposals will be considered as part of the development of the Government’s legislative programme.

An Bord Pleanála

393. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans to ensure An Bord Pleanála meets its timelines for making planning decisions. [14913/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): An Bord Pleanála is the national independent statutory body with responsibility for the determination of planning appeals and direct applications for strategic infrastructure and other developments under the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended) and certain other Acts.

Under section 126 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, An Bord Pleanála has a statutory objective to determine normal planning appeals within 18 weeks of receipt of the appeal. Furthermore, under Section 37J of the Act, the Board has an objective to make decisions on applications for strategic infrastructure development within a period of 18 weeks, beginning on the last day for making submissions or observations.

Where the Board does not consider it possible or appropriate to reach a decision within 18 weeks (e.g. because of the particular complexities of a case or the requirement to hold an oral hearing), it will inform the parties of the reasons for this, and will indicate when it intends to make its decision.

The Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act 2016 provided for streamlined arrangements to enable planning applications for strategic housing developments, of 100 housing units or more or student accommodation developments of 200 bed spaces or more, to be made directly to the Board for determination within a period of 16 weeks or 24 weeks where an oral hearing is held.

The main volume of the Board’s workload continues to be normal planning appeal cases – these cases made up 71% of the case intake in 2019. 69% of such cases were disposed within

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the statutory objective period (SOP) of 18 weeks in 2019, compared to 39% in 2018. The compliance rate for these cases for 2020 was 76% (to end June 2020), which is slightly above the compliance target set out in the Performance Delivery Agreement between An Bord Pleanála and the Department.

In relation to strategic housing applications (SHD), despite a tripling of valid SHD applications from 39 in 2018 to 119 in 2019, all decisions made in 2019 and to date in 2020 have been made within the statutory objective period of 16 weeks (or 24 weeks in cases where oral hearings have been held).

Compliance with the relevant statutory objective period for making decisions on Strategic Infrastructure Development cases (SID) was at 31% in 2019 which reflects the level of complexity and the fact that additional time is often required to conduct hearings and to consider further information.

My Department has worked closely with the Board over the last year or so on a range of measures aimed at increasing its compliance rate with the statutory objective period, including the appointment of Board members and the provision of additional staff resources. I am satisfied with the impact these measures appear to be having and as such, I have no plans currently to introduce new legislation aimed specifically at increasing the Board's compliance rate.

My Department will continue to liaise closely with the Board to ensure that it has appropriate resources to maintain and improve its compliance rate, in line with its Performance Delivery Agreement targets.

Electoral Process

394. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans for electoral reform. [14914/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Programme for Government - "Our Shared Future" - commits to several electoral reform initiatives. These include:

- Putting in place an Electoral Commission by the end of 2021. The Electoral Commission will provide independent oversight of electoral events. It will be empowered to regulate online political advertising and will be mandated to examine the use of postal voting with a view to expanding its provision. Within 12 months of being established the Commission will also be tasked with examining the use of posters at elections and referendums.

- Completing the modernisation process for voter registration,

- Reviewing our electoral laws and the conduct of politics in Ireland, to ensure that donations and resources from non-citizens outside the State are not being utilised to influence our elections and political process.

- Examination of the potential for replacing bye-elections with an alternate list system.

- Establishing a fund to support political and electoral research by academics and researchers.

- Examining the Scottish experience of reducing the voting age to 17 in order to draw conclusions.

- Examining the time limitation on people who are temporarily living outside of the State to remain on the voting register.

I am committed to advancing all of the commitments relating to electoral reform that are set out over the lifetime of the Programme for Government.

Urban Regeneration and Development Fund

395. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of calls under the Project Ireland urban regeneration and development fund; and the timelines for the announcement of future funding under the fund. [14916/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Under Call 1 in July 2018, bids were invited from all public bodies for funding support from the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF). A total of 189 applications were received. The application process was competitive. All proposals went through a rigorous assessment including consideration by a Project Advisory Board, which consisted of representatives from my Department, other relevant Government Departments, agency representation and independent national and international expert representatives. On 26 November 2018, URDF support was announced for a total of 88 projects throughout the country, one of which was later withdrawn by the applicant.

In mid-2019 approval in principle and provisional funding allocations issued in respect of 87 major projects across the country. This significant pipeline of projects is set to have a transformational impact in urban areas across the country. The 87 projects approved under Call 1 offer a good regional spread, and span a number of themes. The diversity of this first tranche of projects demonstrates the broad focus and responsive nature of the Fund. Through the URDF, successful applicants are receiving targeted integrated support for innovative holistic solutions to the issues that have hindered the regeneration and rejuvenation of our large towns and cities.

While the advancement of each project is, in the first instance, a matter for the successful applicant my Department is working closely with them to ensure timely progress.

Call 2 was announced earlier this year and the closing date for applications was 29 May. Seventy six proposals were received, with every local authority submitting at least one application for URDF support.

Because of the nature of the URDF programme the proposals are very complex, and each will require detailed assessment. The assessment process will take place over the coming months with the intention that a new tranche of approved proposals, which will augment the existing pipeline of projects from Call 1 and contribute to the achievement of Programme for Government commitments and the objectives of the National Planning Framework and Project Ireland 2040, will be announced later in the year.

Vacant Properties

396. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of void council units for each municipal district within the Clare County Council area approved for refurbishment funding; the number of units completed for the end of April, May June and to date in July 2020; and the number of properties allocated by Clare County Council in quarter 2 for 2020 by month, in tabular form. [14967/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):

The management and maintenance of local authority housing stock, including pre-letting repairs to vacant properties, the implementation of a planned maintenance programme and carrying out of responsive repairs, are matters for each individual local authority under Section 58 of the Housing Act 1966.

Since 2014, Exchequer funding has also been provided through my Department's Voids Programme to support local authorities in preparing vacant units for re-letting. This funding was initially introduced to tackle long term vacant units and is now increasingly targeted at ensuring minimal turnaround and re-let times for local authority vacant stock.

Clare County Council has received €7.86 million in funding under the Voids Programme from 2014 to 2019, supporting 392 homes being returned to use. For 2020 there is a two stage process for allocations under the Voids Programme. Firstly, on 26 May, there was an initial call for proposals for COVID-19 related voids funding to support the return of homes which were required for the emergency accommodation of qualified households arising from the need to prevent, limit, minimise or slow the spread of COVID-19. A second call for proposals, under the general voids programme, will issue shortly.

Information regarding the breakdown by Municipal District area real-time progress on individual units under the programme should be available from Clare County Council.

There is a commitment under Rebuilding Ireland that local authorities will introduce a preventative maintenance approach to the management of their housing stock. My Department is working with local authorities to this end.

Planning Issues

397. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if issues in relation to planning will be addressed (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15000/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):

In making a decision on a planning application or appeal, a planning authority or An Bord Pleanála must consider the proper planning and sustainable development of the area concerned while having regard to the provisions of the relevant development plan, relevant Ministerial or Government policies and guidelines, as well as the views of members of the public on the proposed development.

Public participation is, therefore, a crucial element of all substantive decision-making processes under the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, and is also a requirement under the UN Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation on Decision Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (the Aarhus Convention) and the European Union Environmental Impact Assessment Directive 2011/92/EU, as amended, in relation to specific types of developments.

It is open to any member of the public to make an observation or submission on a planning application and the planning authority is statutorily obliged to consider such submissions before making a decision on the application. Persons who make submissions are also entitled to be notified of any significant further information provided to the planning authority by the applicant and to be notified of the authority's decision on the application. Furthermore, any person who made a submission on a planning application may appeal the planning authority's decision on the application to An Bord Pleanála or may make a submission to the Board in relation to an

appeal of that decision.

The fees payable by members of the public to participate in the planning decision-making process are set at a level that, as well as contributing towards the cost of processing applications and appeals, discourages frivolous or vexatious submissions without hindering genuine public participation. In addition, the Board has discretion to dismiss an appeal where it is satisfied that the appeal is vexatious, frivolous or without substance or foundation, or where the appeal is made with the sole intention of delaying development or of securing the payment of money, gifts, considerations or other inducement by any person. Furthermore, where a planning authority or An Bord Pleanála has suspicions that specific submissions on planning applications or appeals may not be genuine, it is a matter for them to refer the submissions to the Garda Síochána for investigation.

I am satisfied that the current arrangements in relation to public participation in decision-making contribute significantly to the openness and transparency of the planning process, and I have no proposals to amend the legislation in this regard.

Social and Affordable Housing

398. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans for the provision of an adequate supply of affordable and local authority housing in line with current and growing needs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15004/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): This Government is absolutely committed to ensuring that affordable, quality housing solutions are available to everyone in Irish society and this is reflected in the Programme for Government “Our Shared Future”. The Programme commits to increasing the social housing stock by over 50,000 over the next five years, with an emphasis on new builds. It also pledges to put affordability at the heart of the housing system through the progression of State-backed affordable housing.

Since taking up Office I have established a Top Level Group of delivery partners to ensure that delivery is prioritised this year, taking account of the impact of Covid 19. Over the weeks ahead I will expand this work to deal with the expedited delivery of social and affordable housing over the lifetime of the Government.

In terms of affordable housing, I will outline my detailed plans in the Autumn, taking account of the progress made under the Serviced Site Fund, the development of the Affordable Purchase Scheme and work on the Cost Rental model.

Fire Service

399. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if a site has been identified for a new fire service facility in Dunleer, County Louth; when work will commence; the planned completion date for the project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15022/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The provision of a fire service in its functional area, including the establishment and maintenance of a fire brigade, the assessment of fire cover needs and the provision of fire station

premises, is a statutory function of individual fire authorities under the Fire Services Acts, 1981 and 2003. My Department supports the fire authorities through setting general policy, providing a central training programme, issuing guidance on operational and other related matters and providing capital funding for priority infrastructural projects.

In February 2016, my Department announced a five-year Fire Services Capital Programme with an allocation of €40 million, based on an annual €8 million allocation, to be used for the purchase of fire appliances and specialist equipment, building or upgrading of prioritised Fire Stations, an upgrade of the Communications and Mobilisation system and improvements to Training Centres.

A new fire station at Dunleer is included in the Capital Programme, with an estimated commencement date this year. Identification of potential sites, determination of suitability of sites for a fire station and acquisition of an optimal site is being undertaken by Louth County Council. My Department will continue to work with the Council to progress this project in accordance with the schedule set out in the Capital Programme.

Pyrite Remediation Programme

400. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he will provide a report on the status of houses affected by pyrite; if further funding or supports will be provided for house owners who wish to carry out ongoing monitoring of their property or remedial works; if a scheme can be agreed with mortgage providers to accommodate the sale of such properties in circumstances in which the levels of pyrite has been consistently low over a number of years and in which major defects have not materialised; if he and the Minister for Finance will consult with the Central Bank on the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15030/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The pyrite remediation scheme is a scheme of “last resort” applicable to dwellings, which are subject to significant damage attributable to pyritic heave. The full conditions for eligibility under the Scheme are available on the Pyrite Board’s website at www.pyriteboard.ie.

The latest figures available indicate that 2,680 applications have been received under Scheme and, so far, 2,246 dwellings have been included. A further 126 applications have been validated and referred to the Housing Agency for the Assessment and Verification Process, 113 applications are at the initial Application and Validation Process and 195 applications were not successful. Of the 2,246 dwellings included, the works in respect of 1,976 are complete with the rest at various stages of progress.

The sale of private properties is a matter for individual homeowners. Financial services policy is a matter for my colleague the Minister for Finance.

Ministerial Responsibilities

401. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for local government and planning; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15050/20]

402. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for heritage

and electoral reform; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15051/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 401 and 402 together.

I am currently considering the matter of the delegation of particular functions to both Ministers of State who have recently been assigned to my Department.

Responsibility for Heritage matters has been assigned to my Department as part of the formation of the new Government. Once the transfer of functions in respect of Heritage matters is completed in conjunction with my colleague, the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, I will complete the delegation of appropriate functions within my Department.

Local Authority Members

403. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of the implementation of the Moorhead Report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15116/20]

416. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the status of the Moorhead Report; when it will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15409/20]

418. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government when the pay rise recommended for city and county councillors in the Moorhead Report will be implemented; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15568/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 403, 416 and 418 together.

The report of the Independent Review of the Role and Remuneration of Elected Members, led by Ms Sara Moorhead SC, was brought to Government on Friday, 19 June 2020, and then published. The Report was circulated on that date to all local authority elected members and to members of both Houses of the Oireachtas. The Report is available on my Department's website at https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/independent_review_of_role_and_remuneration_of_local_authority_elected_members.pdf

The Programme for Government Our Shared Future has a commitment to "implement the Moorhead Report on the Role and Remuneration of Local Authority Elected Members within 12 months". Meeting this commitment is a priority within my Department.

Any changes to elected members' remuneration will require new regulations under section 142 of the Local Government Act 2001, as amended, which must be given effect with the consent of my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

Seaweed Harvesting

404. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government when he plans to bring forward new foreshore legislation to update the law in relation to the issuing of seaweed harvesting licences along the coast in view of the potential of this industry, if carried out in a sustainable manner; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15128/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):

I acknowledge that the Foreshore Act needs reform and my Department published in January, 2020 the finalised General Scheme of the Marine Planning and Development Management Bill, which will provide the legislative basis for Ireland's new marine planning regime. The commitment in the Programme for Government to enact this legislation in nine months reflects the priority it has been accorded.

Further policy work is continuing on the development of certain aspects of the proposed regime and intensive engagements in that regard are ongoing with the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, which is leading the development of the provisions specific to Offshore Renewable Energy. In addition to the policy development work, engagement is also continuing with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel, other Departments and agencies on the drafting of the legal text.

This new regime will replace the existing State and development consent regimes and streamline arrangements on the basis of a single consent principle i.e. one state consent (Maritime Area Consent) to enable occupation of the Maritime Area and one development consent (planning permission), with a single environmental assessment. It provides reinforced provisions for forward planning under the National Marine Planning Framework and new powers and provisions in relation to enforcement and compliance.

Help-To-Buy Scheme

405. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans to change the salary cap threshold for first-time buyers of houses that apply for State loans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15136/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):

Following a review of the two existing local authority home loan schemes, the House Purchase Loan and the Home Choice Loan, a new loan offering was introduced, from 1 February 2018, known as the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan. The loan enables credit worthy first time buyers to access sustainable mortgage lending to purchase new or second-hand properties in a suitable price range.

Single applicants for the loan must not be earning greater than €50,000 gross per annum. The combined income of joint applicants must not be greater than €75,000 per annum. There are no set minimum income limits; however, applicants do need to have sufficient borrowing and repayment capacity and must be capable of repaying the mortgage in accordance with the statutory credit policy underpinning the loan. These income limits are unchanged from the previous local authority loan offerings.

The new Programme for Government "Our Shared Future" contains a commitment to expand the Rebuilding Home Loan.

Homelessness Strategy

406. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if he will set up a new homeless task force; if so, the details of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15138/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I

have established a Top Level Homelessness Group, to provide a forum for engagement with key organisations working to address homelessness. The Group will input on the implementation of the commitments on homelessness in the Programme for Government. I chaired the first meeting of the Group which took place on 13 July 2020.

Local Authority Funding

407. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the steps he plans to take to make up the funding shortfall in 2021 in the equalisation fund to both Galway County Council and Galway City Council as outlined in the expert report on the amalgamation of both councils which highlighted the urgent need to deal with this matter before a restructuring of the councils took place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15175/20]

415. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government when the €1 million in additional Local Government Fund allocations will be provided to Galway County Council; if the Local Government Fund matrix will be adjusted to increase funding to local authorities whose funding is below the average; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15403/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 407 and 415 together.

The Programme for Government – Our Shared Future commits to reforming and re-imagining our public life. This mission sets out a number of commitments that relate to local authority funding, including setting out how commercial rates will be treated for the remainder of 2020, as a priority action. The Programme also commits to bringing forward legislation for the Local Property Tax on the basis of fairness and that most homeowners will face no increase. The programme states that those counties with a lower LPT base will be adjusted via an annual national equalisation fund paid from the Exchequer, as is currently the case.

Notwithstanding that, all local authorities are experiencing financial challenges as a result of Covid-19. In order to support the local government sector generally, my Department continues to keep local authority income, expenditure and cash flow generally under review and will continue to work with all local authorities on both collective and individual issues that arise, including Galway County Council.

Tenant Purchase Scheme

408. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government when the review of the tenant purchase (incremental) scheme 2016 was completed; when he plans to publish the review; when he plans to make changes to the scheme; the reason for the delay in doing so; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15176/20]

445. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans to review the tenant incremental purchase scheme to allow those who were tenants of Part V houses prior to the introduction of the regulations to proceed with the purchase of their homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15938/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 408 and 445 together.

The Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme came into operation on 1 January 2016. The Scheme is open to eligible tenants, including joint tenants, of local authority houses that are available for sale under the Scheme. To be eligible, tenants must meet certain criteria, including having a minimum reckonable income of €15,000 per annum and having been in receipt of social housing support for at least one year.

The provisions of Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, are designed to enable the development of mixed tenure sustainable communities. Part V homes are excluded from the Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme 2016 to ensure that homes delivered under this mechanism will remain available for people in need of social housing support and that the original policy goals of the legislation are not eroded over time. The continued development of mixed tenure communities remains very important in promoting social integration.

Local authorities may also, within the provisions of the Regulations, exclude certain houses which, in the opinion of the authority, should not be sold for reasons such as proper stock or estate management. It is a matter for each individual local authority to administer the Scheme in its operational area in line with the over-arching provisions of the governing legislation for the scheme, and in a manner appropriate to its housing requirements.

In line with the commitment given in Rebuilding Ireland, a review of the first 12 months of the Scheme's operation was undertaken. The review incorporated analysis of comprehensive data received from local authorities regarding the operation of the scheme during 2016 and a wide-ranging public consultation process which took place in 2017 and saw submissions received from individuals, elected representatives and organisations.

The Programme for Government commits to maintaining the right of social housing tenants to purchase their own home with some changes to eligibility. The review and the commitments in the Programme for Government are being examined as part of the work on the broader social housing reform agenda. The position of those who were tenants in Part V units prior to the introduction of the regulations is a matter for consideration.

The review of the Scheme is part of a significant body of work undertaken in my Department in relation to the broader social housing reform agenda. I would hope to be in a position to publish the review and finalise changes to the Scheme once the work on these reform measures is complete.

Housing Assistance Payment

409. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the frequency of use of the discretionary top-up for HAP payments in 2019 in County Wicklow by municipal district; the average percentage of this top-up per municipal district; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15229/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Local authorities have discretion, on a case by case basis, based on the local rental market conditions, to exceed the maximum HAP rent limit by up to 20%. In the Dublin region for those households either in, or at immediate risk of, homelessness, the local authorities can exceed the limit by up to 50%.

As at Q4 2019 approximately 42.7% of the total number of households supported by HAP were benefiting from the additional flexibility. If the additional discretion available to homeless households in the Dublin Region is removed, then 36% of households nationally were benefiting from the additional flexibility. In those cases, the average rate of discretionary payment was

16.6% above HAP rent limits.

A breakdown of the number of HAP tenancies in 2019, and the average top-up percentage paid, for the municipal areas requested, is set out in the following table:

Municipal Area	No. of tenancies that received top-up	Average Discretion Rate
Arklow	80	17%
Baltinglass	19	19%
Bray	38	17%
Greystones	34	18%
Wicklow	52	18%

Homeless Persons Data

410. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of single persons and family units, respectively, in Bray, County Wicklow who presented as homeless to the local authority in 2019 and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15230/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department does not hold the specific details requested by the Deputy. My Department publishes a detailed monthly report on homelessness, based on data provided by housing authorities. The Report outlines details of individuals utilising State-funded emergency accommodation arrangements that are overseen by housing authorities. The Reports are available on my Department's website at the following link: <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data>.

Social and Affordable Housing

411. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of persons on the social housing list in Bray, County Wicklow; the number on the list in Bray, County Wicklow for over 12 years; the number of children awaiting housing on the list in Bray, County Wicklow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15231/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Details on the number of households qualified for social housing support in each local authority area are set out in the statutory Summary of Social Housing Assessments (SSHA). The most recent summary, conducted in June 2019, shows that 68,693 households were assessed as qualified for and being in need of social housing support. This represents a decrease of 3,165 households or 4.4% on the last assessment in June 2018. Indeed, since 2016, the numbers have decreased from 91,600 to 68,693, a reduction of 25%.

Below is the link to the summary report for 2019 which includes breakdowns by each local authority, including Wicklow across a range of categories. SSHA data is collected and collated at local authority level and therefore a breakdown of the numbers by electoral area cannot be provided. Details on the length of time spent on the record of qualified households (waiting lists) can be found at tables 2.8 and A1.8 of the report.

Tables 2.4 and A1.4 provide details on household size, including a breakdown of the household composition, which provides a granular level of detail regarding the number of persons in each household type, including children.

Report 2019

https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/sha_summary_2019_dec_2019_web_1.pdf.

It should be noted that the SSHA is a point in time exercise and does not necessarily reflect the dynamic nature of entry to and exit from the list.

Question No. 412 answered with Question No. 385.

Water and Sewerage Schemes

413. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his views on the latest EPA report detailing problems with 50 wastewater treatment plants nationwide; the reason completion dates for the upgrade of wastewater treatment plans in breach of the urban wastewater treatment directive have been moved from 2021 to 2024; the way in which this will affect the ongoing European Commission enforcement proceedings against Ireland for breaches of the directive; and the capital budget for wastewater treatment plant upgrades in each of the years 2014 to 2024, in tabular form. [15373/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I understand that the question relates to drinking water treatment supplies.

Ensuring provision of safe drinking water is a priority for me and for the Government.

The Environmental Protection Agency's recently published report, "Drinking Water Quality in Public Supplies 2019", shows that our water supplies are safe. Over 99% of water samples comply with safety limits. There has also been a further reduction in the number of supplies on the EPA's remedial action list.

However, it is clear that significant challenges remain in delivering the programme of work that Irish Water has been tasked to deliver. The new Programme for Government sets out clear and ambitious commitments, including funding Irish Water's capital investment plans of €8.5 billion under the National Development Plan.

I recognise the demanding work that Irish Water, along with its local authority partners, is undertaking to address those issues identified in the EPA report and I have arranged a meeting with the management of Irish Water this week to discuss the report and the delivery of the goals contained in the Programme for Government.

In relation to the European Commission's 'Reasoned Opinion', my Department remains in contact with the EU Commission in respect of this case and the delivery of the ongoing reform of water services in Ireland.

Since 1 January 2014, Irish Water has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels. The Irish Water Strategic Funding Plan 2019-2024 sets out Irish Water's multi-annual strategic business planning funding requirement of €11bn to 2024, comprised of a €6.1bn investment in infrastructure and assets, including €1.1bn for water quality, and €4.9bn in operating costs.

Further detail in relation to the breakdown of Irish Water's capital investment should be sought from Irish Water. It may be helpful to note that Irish Water has established a dedicated team to deal with representations and queries from public representatives. The team can be contacted via email at Oireachtasmembers@water.ie or by telephone on a dedicated number,

1890 578 578.

Water and Sewerage Schemes

414. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans for the provision of funding for the construction of municipal wastewater treatment plants in Craughwell, Corofin and Abbeyknockmoy, County Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15394/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Craughwell, Corofin and Abbeyknockmoy are three un-sewered villages in County Galway.

In February 2019 my Department announced the Multi-Annual Rural Water Programme 2019-2020 (MARWP 2019-2021), the composition of this programme is based on recommendations from the Working Group established in April 2018 to conduct a review of rural water services. There is a two-strand approach to the considerations of the Working Group. Strand 1 considered the composition and distribution of funding for the MARWP 2019-2021, while Strand 2 is considering the long-term future resourcing of the rural water sector. The wastewater infrastructure needs of rural villages is an issue that the Working Group is to examine further.

Since 1 January 2014, Irish Water has statutory responsibility for all aspects of public water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels. Irish Water brought forward proposals for a Small Towns & Villages Growth Programme, as part of its Capital Investment Plan 2020-2024 submitted to the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, which will support a number of the National Policy Objectives and National Strategic Outcomes under the National Planning Framework. The Small Towns & Villages Growth Programme is intended to provide water and wastewater growth capacity in smaller settlements which would not otherwise be provided for in its Investment Plan to 2024. Irish Water will work with local authorities across the country in ensuring the investment is made where it is needed most, aligned to core strategies. I understand that Irish Water is currently advancing its proposals on this programme.

In addition to the support the plan gives to sewered locations in urban and rural Ireland, Irish Water is also prepared to support local authorities who wish to seek funding for un-sewered villages through the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund of the National Development Plan.

In July 2019, my Department launched the multi-annual Developer-Provided Water Services Infrastructure Resolution Programme 2019-2021. Bids were sought from local authorities with Developer-Provided Water Services Infrastructure in residential estates in their areas to apply for funding. It is noted Galway County Council included estates in the three villages in the question in its application. An Expert Panel, which includes Departmental, stakeholder and independent representation, has been appointed to examine the bids against the criteria set out in the scheme. I expect that the Expert Panel will make recommendations to me shortly on the suitability of projects for funding under the programme and an announcement on approvals and allocations will be made once that process is concluded in the coming weeks.

Question No. 415 answered with Question No. 407.

Question No. 416 answered with Question No. 403.

Rental Sector

417. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if a progress report will be provided on the cost rental project at Enniskerry Road, County Wicklow; the estimated rental cost of each on-site unit; the status of the roll out of further cost rental projects nationwide; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15531/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): As confirmed in the Programme for Government 'Our Shared Future', this Government is committed to the introduction of Cost Rental housing in Ireland.

Ireland's first Cost Rental development is currently under construction at Enniskerry Road, Stepaside, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. The project is being undertaken by two Approved Housing Bodies, Tuath and Respond, with the assistance of DLR County Council. The mixed-tenure development comprises 50 Cost Rental homes alongside 105 social housing homes. Delivery of the Cost Rental homes is being supported by zero-cost land supplied by the Housing Agency, an infrastructure grant from my Department's Serviced Site Fund, and debt financing from the Housing Finance Agency. Construction began in July 2019 with delivery scheduled for Q3 2021, pre-Covid.

A second pilot project, sponsored by my Department is under development for a site at Emmet Road, Inchicore (the former St Michael's Estate). The project is being led by Dublin City Council. The proposal is for DCC to construct 375 Cost Rental units alongside 109 social housing units. A Development Framework Plan has been completed and DCC has recently appointed an architect-led integrated design team to progress the project through the planning and construction phases.

Another proposed Cost Rental development, at Shanganagh Castle, Shankill, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, where DLR County Council is working in partnership with the Land Development Agency to develop the Council-owned site. On Monday, 13th July, planning permission was confirmed for 597 homes on the site which it is intended will comprise 35% social homes, 15% affordable purchase homes and 51% cost rental homes. While the final cost of rents will vary according to the ultimate cost of provision of the homes, the LDA and DLR County Council are targeting rents which will achieve a significant discount on market rents in the area.

In addition to the project at Shanganagh, the Land Development Agency is examining the potential to deliver Cost Rental homes at scale from its initial portfolio of sites and the broader State land bank. This includes sites such as the former Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum

Question No. 418 answered with Question No. 403.

Water and Sewerage Schemes

419. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if a Covid-19 risk assessment has been carried out for wastewater treatment plants and for outdoor workers who clean blocked sewers. [15581/20]

420. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if PPE has been deemed necessary for and provided to workers who clean blocked sewers. [15582/20]

421. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if special training has been afforded to workers who clean blocked sewers in order to minimise their exposure to Covid-19. [15583/20]

422. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if Irish Water and the local authorities have carried out temperature testing for those who work at wastewater treatment plants. [15584/20]

423. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if the different stages of wastewater treatment have been assessed for risk. [15585/20]

424. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if there is an airborne risk to staff in wastewater treatment plants. [15586/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 419 to 424, inclusive, together.

Since 1 January 2014, Irish Water has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels.

The Return to Work Safely Protocol sets out in very clear terms, the steps that must be taken for the protection of employees while any workplace is in operation. This protocol is the result of a collaborative effort by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), the Health Services Executive (HSE) and the Department of Health and the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, and is designed to support employers and workers when putting measures in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace.

Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations 2007, for which my colleague the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation is responsible, it is the legal duty of employers to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the safety, health and welfare at work of all of his or her employees.

The safety of Irish Water's customers and employees is of utmost importance and my Department has been in constant contact with officials in Irish Water throughout this emergency and are assured that all safety protocols are being adhered to. In addition, Irish Water is in contact with water and waste water utility companies across Europe to exchange international experience and information on responding to the operational and other risks associated with COVID-19.

The role of the Health and Safety Authority is to ensure compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol. If an employee feels the workplace is not in compliance with this protocol which includes social distancing guidelines, they can raise their concerns with the HSA and they will address the concerns with their employer.

Urban Regeneration and Development Fund

425. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the funding allocated from the urban regeneration and development fund for the North Quays project, Waterford; when further funding will be announced; the amount of funding expected to be allocated; if this involves funding to move the train station onto the North Quays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15606/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) is a flagship element of Project Ireland 2040. Under the stewardship of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, the Fund was established to support more compact and sustainable development, through the regeneration and rejuvenation of Ireland's five cities and other large towns, in line with the

objectives of the National Planning Framework and National Development Plan (NDP). This is to enable a greater proportion of residential and mixed-use development to be delivered within the existing built-up footprints of our cities and towns and to ensure that more parts of our urban areas can become attractive and vibrant places in which people choose to live and work, as well as to invest and to visit.

There is an Exchequer commitment of €550 million for the Fund to support approved URDF-supported projects and other similar projects up to the end of 2022. The URDF has an allocation of €2 billion in the NDP to 2027 and €130 million is available in 2020.

As part of the first call for proposals under the URDF Waterford City and County Council submitted a bid for Exchequer grant funding in respect of a major multifaceted project for the North Quays, Waterford, an area designated a Strategic Development Zone.

It is intended that the largely transport focussed infrastructural works involved will open up the North Quays site, make it more accessible, and ultimately support the achievement of the broader objectives of the SDZ planning scheme.

On 26 November 2018, the then Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government announced initial URDF support of €100m for a total of 88 projects across the country, including €6m of initial support for the Waterford North Quays Project. Furthermore, in June 2019, URDF support of €30m was ring-fenced in respect of the advancement of the overall North Quays Project, pending further clarification of the project detail.

This is a very complex and high value project in a strategic development zone, and so it is critical that careful consideration is given to its planning and development, and also in order to establish the correct combination of supports required to facilitate its successful advancement and completion. At this stage, the project composition, costs, sequencing, and requisite supports must be further clarified so that the appropriate level of ‘whole project’ URDF support can be established.

While the advancement of the North Quays Project is, in the first instance, a matter for Waterford City and County Council, my Department is continuing to engage with the local authority to assist further progress on the development of this important project.

Planning Issues

426. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans to introduce new legislation to provide for leave to apply for substitute consent in line with the environmental impact assessment, EIA, directive in view of a recent Supreme Court decision on planning; when it is intended to do so; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15655/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): I am aware of the recent Supreme Court judgment to which the Question refers, concerning the leave to apply for substitute consent system under the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended and its compatibility with the EIA Directive.

The judgment and its implications are currently being examined by my Department and any measures necessary to address the findings of the judgment will be brought forward in due course.

Social and Affordable Housing

427. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the most recent average construction and all-in development costs for one-, two-, three- and four-bedroom social houses and one-, two- and three-bedroom social apartments delivered under the SHIP programme, in tabular form. [15735/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): My Department provides Unit Cost Ceilings (UCCs) to each local authority as a key benchmark for the development and costing of new build social housing. The tables below outline the current of UCC values for houses and apartments across all local authority areas.

HOUSES

-	1 bed	2 bed (1 storey)	2 bed (2 storey)	3 bed	4 bed
Construction	€129k -€240k	€138k -€251k	€147k -€261k	€157k -€273k	€171k -€291k
All-in-Cost	€167k -€310k	€178k -€324k	€187k -€336k	€199k -€349k	€215k -€370k

APARTMENTS

-	1 bed	2 bed	3 bed
Construction	€145k -€268k	€158k -€287k	€177k -€314k
All-in-Cost	€187k -€346k	€204k -€371k	€225k -€403k

The above figures are based on returned data from tendered social housing schemes over an extended period and are updated based on published tender index information as required. Construction cost as shown, is reflective of building costs (including VAT) and also includes normal site works and site development. ‘All-in Cost’ includes cost of construction, land cost, professional fees, utility connections, site investigations/surveys, VAT and contribution to public art. Abnormal costs are excluded from these figures.

Social and Affordable Housing

428. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the average cost of acquiring one-, two-, three- and four-bedroom social houses and one-, two- and three-bedroom social apartments under Part V in 2019, in tabular form. [15736/20]

429. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the average cost per unit of the 1,119 social housing turnkey units that were delivered in 2019. [15737/20]

430. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the average cost of delivering a turnkey unit for social housing by approved housing bodies in 2019. [15738/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 428 to 430, inclusive, together.

I refer to the reply to Question No. 284 of 7 July which sets out the position in this matter.

Social and Affordable Housing

431. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the average cost of acquiring a unit by local authorities for social housing in 2019. [15739/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Under my Department's Social Housing Investment Programme, funding is available to all local authorities to deliver additional social housing stock through the acquisition of new and previously owned houses/apartments for social housing use.

Activity in this regard is largely delegated to local authorities so they can respond flexibly to all opportunities to provide new social housing. The table below sets out details of the average costs, including estimated costs of refurbishment, for the acquisitions delivered in 2019 by each local authority. Costs are shown as estimated in certain cases pending receipt of final claims from local authorities.

Local Authority	Average Cost
Carlow	€189,740
Cavan	€157,270
Clare	€197,800
Cork City	€252,130
Cork County	€238,900
DLR	€370,730
Donegal	€151,430
Dublin City	€297,380
Fingal	€306,340
Galway City	€247,480
Galway County	€187,630
Kerry	€177,520
Kildare	€240,720
Kilkenny	€188,300
Laois	€157,640
Leitrim	€153,500
Limerick	€220,630
Longford	€142,780
Louth	€176,950
Mayo	€151,600
Meath	€257,320
Monaghan	€200,550
Offaly	€201,850
Roscommon	€149,940
Sligo	€137,540
South Dublin	€266,940
Tipperary	€164,990
Waterford	€140,300
Westmeath	€201,080
Wexford	€158,890
Wicklow	€295,080

The Programme for Government commits to delivering 50,000 new social homes over the coming five-year period, with a strong and increasing emphasis on new build supply.

432. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the average cost of acquiring a unit for social housing use through the buy-and-renew scheme. [15740/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): Local authorities delivered over 550 new social homes under the Buy and Renew Scheme to date. The table below sets out details of the average cost of the Scheme, including estimated costs of refurbishment, for each local authority. Costs are shown as estimated in certain cases pending receipt of final claims from local authorities. Nationally, the average cost of the purchase element is €145,000 increasing to €193,000 including refurbishment.

LA	Average Cost
Carlow	€165,180
Cavan	€174,070
Clare	€189,790
Cork City	€253,840
Cork County	€222,900
DLR	€338,460
Donegal	€175,850
Dublin City	€239,900
Fingal	€326,880
Kerry	€156,040
Kildare	€243,240
Kilkenny	€190,620
Laois	€143,540
Leitrim	€127,060
Limerick	€209,670
Longford	€107,810
Louth	€158,610
Mayo	€254,510
Meath	€214,310
Monaghan	€150,050
Offaly	€127,650
Roscommon	€106,380
Sligo	€215,410
Tipperary	€142,650
Waterford	€90,000
Westmeath	€103,730
Wexford	€128,970

Commercial Rates

433. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the estimated cost to the Exchequer due to revenue lost in rates and non-rates by local authorities due to Covid-19. [15741/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): In order to support the local government sector, my Department continues 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.

14 July 2020

The County and City Management Association (CCMA) has estimated the loss of non-rates income for 2020 to be in the region of €91 million. This is under consideration by my Department as part of the revised estimates under preparation.

It is not possible to accurately calculate the loss of income from commercial rates in 2020 at this stage in the year, due to the range of payment plans available to ratepayers and the variety of payment patterns from different sectors of ratepayers. This is coupled with the fact that the second moiety has only been due since 1 July and is payable until the end of the year. Furthermore, Government is considering the treatment of rates for the remainder of 2020, in line with the commitment in the programme for Government.

I intend to continue supporting measures taken by my Department to assist local authorities with the financial difficulties they are experiencing since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Traveller Accommodation

434. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government his plans for the implementation of the recommendations of the expert group on Traveller accommodation published in July 2019. [15742/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): There are 32 recommendations in the Traveller Accommodation Expert Review Report, including proposals aimed at:

- addressing research deficiencies, including how information is gathered and used;
- removing any potential delays and obstacles in the planning system in terms of delivery;
- increasing resources and delivery capacity; and
- strengthening governance arrangements.

The recommendations have been categorised into separate streams reflecting recommendations that can be completed within my Department, recommendations that require the assistance of other Government Departments and Agencies and recommendations that will require the commission of further independent research.

I plan to establish a dedicated Programme Board led by my Department and including all the necessary representatives to drive implementation of the Report. The work will be informed by input from key stakeholders, including those representing Travellers.

My Department has already been able to progress a number of short term recommendations and working groups are already working on others. For example, a review has been concluded of the arrangements for the disbursement of funding for the provision and refurbishment of Traveller specific accommodation and a new process implemented for the 2020 allocation of funding process.

Meetings have taken place with working groups within my Department and with other Government agencies and Departments. Officials from my Department are reporting progress on the implementation of the recommendations of the Expert Group report at the NTACC meetings along with seeking input from them as major stakeholders.

Rental Accommodation Standards

435. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the amount allocated to each local authority for rental property inspections to date in 2020; and the projected increase in funding for this purpose for 2021 and 2022. [15743/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): Between 2005 and 2019, over €43 million was paid to local authorities to assist them in the performance of their functions under the Housing Acts, including the inspection of rented accommodation. Over 298,000 inspections were carried out during this period.

The Rental Strategy recognises the need for additional resources to be provided to local authorities to aid increased inspections of properties and ensure greater compliance with the Regulations. Provision has been made for €6 million of Exchequer funding to be made available to local authorities in 2020 for this purpose, with the intention of providing a further increase in 2021 to facilitate a targeted inspection rate of 25% of rental properties annually at that stage. Funding is provided on the basis of inspections carried out rather than through advance allocations.

Detailed information in relation to inspections carried out by each Local Authority since 2005, can be found on my Department’s website at the following link:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/statistics/house-building-and-private-rented/private-housing-market-statistics>

Details of the amounts paid to each local authority in 2020 are set out in the table below:

Local Authority	Total payment to-date 2020
Carlow	€49,200
Cavan	€15,400
Clare	€42,450
Cork County	€52,450
Donegal	€115,500
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown	€75,300
Fingal	€340,050
Galway	€82,150
Kerry	€88,350
Kildare	€62,000
Kilkenny	€50,450
Laois	€40,200
Leitrim	€18,500
Limerick	€82,600
Longford	€9,550
Louth	€52,400
Mayo	€45,100
Meath	€105,950
Monaghan	€17,150
Offaly	€23,700
Roscommon	€24,750
Sligo	€60,850
South Dublin	€114,500
Tipperary	€65,600

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Local Authority	Total payment to-date 2020
Waterford	€54,050
Westmeath	€21,000
Wexford	€93,700
Cork City Council	€51,950
Dublin City Council	€490,098
Galway City Council	€49,000
TOTALS	€2,393,948

Due to the Covid-19 restrictions it has not been possible for all local authorities to submit inspection data for Q1 as yet. Q2 returns will be processed and paid in due course.

Social and Affordable Housing

436. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the expenditure on HAP in 2019 and to date in 2020. [15744/20]

437. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the expenditure on SHCEP in 2019 and to date in 2020. [15745/20]

438. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the expenditure on RAS in 2019 and to date in 2020. [15746/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 436 to 438, inclusive, together.

The expenditure under HAP; RAS and SHCEP in 2019 and up to end June 2020 is set out in the table below.

Scheme	Total Expenditure 2019	Total Expenditure to End June 2020
HAP	€382m	€215.2m
RAS	€134.3m	€47.2m
SHCEP	€139.1m	€52.8m

Housing Adaptation Grant

439. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the total allocation and drawdown of housing adaptation grants in 2019 and to date in 2020. [15747/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The following table contains details of the 2019 exchequer funding drawn down by local authorities for housing adaptation grants up to 31 December 2019, and up to 30 June 2020. Each local authority provides an additional 20% own contribution.

Local Authority	Exchequer Drawdown to 31 December 2019	Exchequer Drawdown to 30 June 2020
Carlow	€1,337,450	€483,281
Cavan	€992,380	€181,975
Clare	€2,399,552	€0
Cork	€4,323,799	€744,336
Cork City	€981,908	€186,807
Donegal	€1,333,144	€458,247

Local Authority	Exchequer Drawdown to 31 December 2019	Exchequer Drawdown to 30 June 2020
Dublin City	€7,395,113	€2,497,418
Dun Laoghaire/ Rathdown	€1,159,572	€288,691
Fingal	€2,043,228	€479,363
Galway	€1,695,312	€566,522
Galway City	€807,777	€267,888
Kerry	€2,549,136	€947,815
Kildare	€2,497,750	€409,619
Kilkenny	€1,526,314	€604,864
Laois	€820,976	€46,120
Leitrim	€154,738	€82,961
Limerick	€2,659,000	€624,758
Longford	€575,984	€68,954
Louth	€1,176,836	€323,687
Mayo	€1,853,661	€496,847
Meath	€2,000,215	€427,130
Monaghan	€1,451,430	€1,023,648
Offaly	€1,294,412	€0
Roscommon	€1,075,381	€52,750
Sligo	€1,162,243	€152,557
South Dublin	€1,785,306	€931,033
Tipperary	€2,944,856	€1,005,290
Waterford	€1,220,152	€454,325
Westmeath	€1,043,669	€184,889
Wexford	€1,896,870	€718,836
Wicklow	€1,108,370	€292,541

For 2020, a total of €73.75 million has been provided for the scheme, and notification of individual local authority allocations will issue shortly. In the interim, all local authorities have been advised that they can expend an amount equal to 65% of their 2019 allocation.

Energy Efficiency

440. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the average cost of retrofitting a social home in 2019. [15748/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department has provided funding for an Energy Efficiency Retrofitting Programme for local authority homes since 2013. The Programme has two phases: Phase 1- which covers the bulk of the work undertaken to date - focuses on delivering immediate improvements such as cavity wall and attic insulation. Phase 2 targets higher cost measures, such as fabric upgrades, window and door upgrades and the installation of photovoltaic panels and heat pumps. To date under the programme, some €151m has been spent nationally, with over 72,000 social housing homes upgraded

The cost of carrying out an energy retrofit on a social housing home varies considerably depending on factors such as dwelling size, year of construction, dwelling condition and construction type. In 2019 expenditure under the programme was €22.4million with 3,803 social homes upgraded. This can be broken down further into 2,468 units under Phase 1 with expenditure of €4,916,529, an average of €1,992 per unit and 1,335 units upgraded under Phase 2 with expen-

diture of €17,512,869, an average of €13,118 per unit.

The Exchequer funding available to local authorities under the social housing retrofit programme for 2019 was up to a maximum €19,800 for a mid-terrace house or apartment and €22,800 for a property that is end-terrace, detached, semi-detached or a bungalow. This funding has increased for 2020 up to a maximum of €30,100 for a mid-terrace house or apartment and €34,600 for a property that is end-terrace, detached, semi-detached or a bungalow.

Rent Data

441. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government when the research being conducted by the ESRI on rental debt during the Covid-19 crisis will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15774/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department and the Economic and Social Research Institute operate a programme of collaborative research principally focused on housing economics. Under this programme, researchers from the Institute and my Department prepared a research paper exploring the short-run implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on the private rental market. The research paper is focused on rental payment affordability and the potential incidence of arrears during the first three months of the pandemic among non-supported private market renting households, that is, among renting households which do not receive a housing subsidy. Changes in consumption patterns arising from public health measures are also considered in the paper.

The research paper is currently undergoing governance and review processes; finalisation and publication is anticipated during the coming weeks.

Homeless Persons Supports

442. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if staff working in private homeless services and hostels are required to be Garda vetted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15838/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department's role in relation to homelessness involves the provision of a national framework of policy, legislation and funding to underpin the statutory role of housing authorities in addressing homelessness at local level.

A National Quality Standards Framework for homeless services has been implemented to ensure a consistent approach in how local authorities and service providers respond to the needs of those experiencing homelessness and to improve the quality of services provided. The Framework includes the provision that service providers must ensure that staff recruitment and selection procedures comply with statutory vetting requirements.

Arising out of a commitment made in Rebuilding Ireland, a specific course on child protection was developed in partnership between the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE) and Tusla. The DRHE has been providing child protection training to Private Emergency Accommodation staff, which covers their legal responsibilities under child protection legislation. Child protection booklets have been distributed to operators of private emergency accommodation.

Building Regulations

443. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government if the building regulations will be changed in order to ensure that each new building has a non-fossil fuel heating system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15842/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): The European Union (Energy Performance of Buildings) Regulations 2019 set higher building energy performance standards for dwellings, in accordance with the Nearly Zero Energy Building requirements (NZEB) contained in the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive.

These Regulations apply to works in connection with the design and construction of a new dwelling, where the relevant works commence or take place, as the case may be, on or after 1 November 2019 except where –

- an application is made on or before 31 October 2019 for planning permission or approval pursuant to the Planning and Development Act 2000 and where substantial work has been completed by 31 October 2020; or

- a notice pursuant to the provisions of Part 8 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 has been published on or before 31 October 2019 and where substantial work has been completed by 31 October 2020.

These regulations will continue to support the phase out of fossil fuel boilers in new dwellings by advancing the energy and carbon dioxide emissions performance requirements of new dwellings to Nearly Zero Energy Buildings standards and by requiring that the nearly zero amount of energy required in new buildings is covered to a very significant extent by energy from renewable sources.

The NZEB requirements make it more attractive for builders and homeowners to further incorporate renewable technologies and move away from traditional fossil fuels. The Central Statistics Office analysis of Building Energy Rating data demonstrates this shift away from fossil fuels; electrical systems make up 44% of heating systems in new dwellings with this percentage growing steadily each year. Solid fuel boilers are no longer installed as main heating systems and the installation of oil boilers in new dwellings has dropped from an average of 37% to 4% in recent years. The installation of gas boilers in new dwellings is expected to follow a similar trend in the coming years as a result of these recently introduced NZEB regulations.

Similarly, Part L the Building Regulations 2017 has set higher building energy performance standards for Buildings other than Dwellings, in accordance with the Nearly Zero Energy Building requirements (NZEB) contained in the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive.

These Regulations apply to works in connection with the design and construction of a new building, where the relevant works commence or take place, as the case may be, on or after 1 January 2019 except where –

- an application is made on or before 31 December 2018 for planning permission or approval pursuant to the Planning and Development Act 2000 and where substantial work has been completed by 1 January 2020; or

- a notice pursuant to the provisions of Part 8 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 has been published on or before 31 December 2018 and where substantial work has been completed by 1 January 2020.

These regulations will also support the phase out of fossil fuel boilers in new buildings other

than dwellings by advancing the energy and carbon dioxide emissions performance requirements to Nearly Zero Energy Buildings standards and by requiring that the nearly zero amount of energy required in new buildings is covered to a very significant extent by energy from renewable sources.

The performance requirements in building regulations are set at the cost optimal level which ensure that the best energy performance is obtained for the lowest lifecycle cost taking account of capital cost and operating costs. A range of solutions can be used to achieve these performance requirements. The advanced performance requirements in the current regulations combined with a mandatory renewables requirement, is creating a rapid transition to low carbon heating systems in new buildings.

The cost optimal calculations are reviewed every 5 years and regulations will be amended if performance levels deviate off cost optimal. This regular assessment and flexibility provides opportunities to capture the benefits of innovation and economies developed in industry over time in regulations.

Covid-19 Pandemic

444. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the actions that have been taken to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in apartment complexes; if property management companies are required to implement protection measures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15887/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Department of Health provides guidance and advice on preventing the spread of COVID-19, which can be found at:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/472f64-covid-19-coronavirus-guidance-and-advice/>.

A Covid-19 public information booklet was delivered to all households as part of the Government efforts to suppress the spread of the virus. Stay Safe Guidelines at Home are available at the link above along with various Covid-19 information posters for use in homes, including apartment complexes.

Property Management Companies are directly contracted by Owner Management Companies to undertake certain specified management functions in apartment complexes, as agreed in a Contract for Service.

Question No. 445 answered with Question No. 408.

Housing Assistance Payment

446. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the breakdown of the HAP payments being paid on a weekly basis by family dynamics and county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16026/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): At the end of Quarter 4 2019, there were more than 52,500 households having their housing needs met via HAP and over 30,000 landlords and agents in receipt of HAP payments.

Under the HAP scheme, tenants source their own accommodation in the private rented mar-

ket. The accommodation sourced by tenants should be within the prescribed maximum HAP rent limits, which are based on household size and the rental market within the area concerned. The list of HAP rent limits for each local authority are available on the Irish Statute Book website at:

<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/si/56/made/en/print>

A summary of the proportion of household types supported by the HAP scheme at end Q4 2019 is set out below:

- Single / Single Sharing - 28%
- Couple / Couple Sharing - 4%
- Lone Parent with Children - 42%
- Couple with Children - 26%

Details of the number of active tenancies and the average monthly landlord payment by local authority area at the end of Q4 2019 are set out in the table below.

Local Authority	Average Landlord Payment	Active tenancies as at end December 2019
Carlow County Council	€561	730
Cavan County Council	€464	342
Clare County Council	€480	1,369
Cork City Council	€802	2,749
Cork County Council	€748	3,431
Donegal County Council	€398	1,805
Dublin City Council	€1,279	3,602
Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council	€1,351	562
Fingal County Council	€1,355	1,898
Galway City Council	€817	1,723
Galway County Council	€735	1,229
Kerry County Council	€527	1,236
Kildare County Council	€933	2,195
Kilkenny County Council	€595	867
Laois County Council	€599	888
Leitrim County Council	€419	254
Limerick City and County Council	€598	2,308
Longford County Council	€415	330
Louth County Council	€876	3,046
Mayo County Council	€512	1,280
Meath County Council	€957	2,089
Monaghan County Council	€514	586
Offaly County Council	€528	883
Roscommon County Council	€470	421
Sligo County Council	€514	758
South Dublin County Council	€1,279	2,726
Tipperary County Council	€500	1,778
Waterford City and County Council	€523	1,952

Local Authority	Average Landlord Payment	Active tenancies as at end December 2019
Westmeath County Council	€565	901
Wexford County Council	€540	1,377
Wicklow County Council	€1,012	1,448
Dublin Region Homeless Executive*	N/A	5,766
Average monthly landlord payment	€848	52,529

* Average monthly landlord payments for tenancies set up by the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive on behalf of the four Dublin local authorities are recorded against the individual local authority.

Rental Sector

447. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the supports available to renters unable to acquire a mortgage to purchase a home; his plans to provide further supports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16115/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department operates the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan, which is targeted at first time buyers who wish to own their own home, have access to an adequate deposit and have the capacity to repay a mortgage, but who are unable to access a mortgage sufficient for them to purchase their first home. As part of the eligibility criteria applicant(s) of the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan must have received insufficient offers of finance from two mortgage lenders to apply for a Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan. The loan enables credit worthy first time buyers to access sustainable mortgage lending to purchase new or second-hand properties in a suitable price range.

Single applicants for the loan must not be earning greater than €50,000 gross per annum. The combined income of joint applicants must not be greater than €75,000 per annum. There are no set minimum income limits; however, applicants do need to have sufficient borrowing and repayment capacity and must be capable of repaying the mortgage in accordance with the statutory credit policy underpinning the loan. With a Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan, applicants can borrow up to 90% of the market value of a residential property. There is also a cap on the maximum value of the property that can be purchased under the scheme. In the greater Dublin area, Cork, and Galway, the maximum market value is €320,000. In the rest of the country, this limit is €250,000.

The availability of the Help To Buy Scheme for first-time-buyers, which is a policy of the Department of Finance, offers additional assistance to purchasers of newly built properties. Up to 5% of the purchase price of properties below €400,000 could be available, which represents a significant contribution towards these deposit requirements. This should alleviate some of the challenges faced by first-time buyers in accessing the 10% deposit of the market value of the property. The initiative has been designed to provide immediate and targeted support for first-time buyers in meeting their deposit requirements and encouraging the construction of new housing units. Further information on this scheme is available on www.revenue.ie.

More generally, there are other proposals to support renters.

As confirmed in the Programme for Government 'Our Shared Future', this Government is

committed to the introduction of Cost Rental housing in Ireland. This recognises that renters in Dublin and other major urban centres are facing significant housing access and affordability challenges. Cost Rental is a fundamentally different housing proposal and represents a new tenure option. It is defined as housing where the rents charged cover the cost of delivering, managing, and maintaining the homes only.

Initial work on Cost Rental is underway and in 2019 an inter-departmental multi-agency Cost Rental Working Group was convened in order to assess methods for the consistent and sustainable delivery Cost Rental at scale. This work will be assisted by a recently initiated research consultancy sponsored by the European Investment Bank on behalf of my Department. The EIB has extensive experience in supporting the delivery of affordable housing across Europe. The final Report is scheduled for completion in December.

The first Cost Rental pilot development in Ireland is currently under construction at Enniskerry Road, Stepside, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. The mixed-tenure development comprises 50 Cost Rental homes alongside 105 social housing homes. The cost-covering rent for a two-bedroom apartment is projected to be €1,200 per month, which represents a significant discount on equivalent market prices in the area. Construction began in July 2019 with delivery scheduled for Q3 2021 (pre-Covid).

Two other Cost Rental projects are also under development, at Emmet Road, Inchicore (the former St Michael's Estate), and at Shanganagh Castle, Shankill, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. At the former site, Dublin City Council are proposing to construct 375 Cost Rental units alongside 109 social housing units, and they have recently appointed an architect-led integrated design team to progress the project through the planning and construction phases. At Shanganagh, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council is working in partnership with the Land Development Agency to develop approximately 300 Cost Rental homes alongside approximately 200 social housing homes and 100 homes for sale under the Affordable Purchase scheme. A planning proposal was lodged with An Bord Pleanála in January 2020.

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. In the long term, the intention is that the development of a Cost Rental model will significantly enhance affordability for moderate-income earners within the rental housing sector.

Public Inquiries

448. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government the number of tribunals, public investigations and commissions of investigations in process; the length of time each has been under way; when each will conclude; the cost to date of each; and the estimated cost of each at completion. [16136/20]

Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): There are no tribunals, public investigations or commissions of investigation currently underway in relation to functional areas relevant to my Department.

There are still claims and payments being processed following the completion of the Tribunal into Certain Planning Matters and Payments (Mahon Tribunal) in 2012. It is estimated that this process will be completed in 2022. The Tribunal has cost €136.3 million to date, with an estimated total cost on completion to be in the region of €140 million, depending on the resolution of outstanding claims.

Northern Ireland

449. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his plans for a border poll in the lifetime of this Government. [15140/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The approach of any Irish Government in relation to Irish unity is guided by Article 3 of the Constitution, as amended by the people in 1998. The Government respects everyone's right on this island to make the case for the constitutional future they wish to see for Northern Ireland - whether the continuation of the union with Great Britain or a sovereign united Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement - and the two sovereign Governments - explicitly recognise and validate the legitimacy of both of these constitutional positions, which are deeply held.

The holding of a referendum in this jurisdiction is connected with the calling of a border poll, under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, in Northern Ireland. The decision to hold such a poll in Northern Ireland rests with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

The full implementation and effective operation of the Good Friday Agreement is a priority for this Government. The principle of consent and the possibility of change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland are fundamental elements of the Good Friday Agreement, endorsed by the people of this island of Ireland, North and South.

Under the Good Friday Agreement, the Irish and British Governments "recognise the legitimacy of whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland with regard to its status, whether they prefer to continue to support the Union with Britain or a sovereign united Ireland" and should such a choice be made in the future, it will be a binding obligation on both Governments to introduce and support in their respective Parliaments legislation to give effect to that wish.

The Government will continue to listen to and engage with the views of everyone on this island, both on rights issues and on the constitutional future that they wish to see for Northern Ireland. These are extremely important issues which naturally require very careful and serious consideration and the Government will continue to engage and reflect on them. It is for that reason that the Programme for Government has committed to establishing a Unit within the Department of An Taoiseach to work towards a consensus on a shared island. This unit will examine the political, social, economic and cultural considerations underpinning a future for this island in which all traditions are mutually respected.

Foreign Birth Registration

450. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade when applications for the foreign births register will be allowed again. [15160/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Foreign Births Registration (FBR) team was reassigned to our consular services at the beginning of the current public health emergency to operate a COVID-19 crisis call centre, assisting our citizens abroad.

Foreign Births Registration, by its nature, can be a detailed and complex process, often involving official documentation related to three generations and issued by several jurisdictions. The Department has seen an increase in the number of applications received, from approximately 6,000 applications in 2015 to over 32,000 in 2019. Almost 10,000 applications have been submitted to date this year. There are currently 27,000 applications waiting to be

processed.

Applications that have been sent to the FBR team are being held securely and will be processed when normal services resume later in the summer. The expected processing time for FBR applications is between 12 and 18 months.

Northern Ireland

451. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his plans to implement the commitments made in the New Decade, New Approach agreement in Northern Ireland and the commitments made by Ireland in relation to building and funding the A5 road and the expansion of the Magee campus in Derry. [15383/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): On 9 January 2020, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and I published the proposed New Decade, New Approach agreement, which was the basis for the political parties in Northern Ireland to resume operating the power-sharing Executive and Assembly.

The Irish and British Governments, at the same time, each announced a series of financial and other commitments in support of the resumption of the power-sharing institutions at Stormont and the work of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC). These commitments are annexed to the proposed agreement, but do not form part of it.

The Irish Government's commitments under New Decade, New Approach include working through the NSMC to help deliver infrastructure that will benefit people across the island, to achieve greater connectivity, North and South, and investing in the North West region and in Border Communities, including a total of £75 million up to 2022 for the A5 road project.

There is also a commitment in principle to contributing to capital investment to support expanded provision at Ulster University Magee Campus, alongside the commitment made in the context of this agreement by the British Government.

I and my Government colleagues are looking forward to meetings of the North South Ministerial Council resuming as soon as possible, with a full plenary meeting of the Council followed by the regular pattern of Ministerial meetings across the NSMC's twelve sectors of cooperation.

These Ministerial meetings will provide opportunities to discuss and to work together with Northern Ireland Executive colleagues on advancing the implementation of the commitments made by the Government in the context of the New Decade, New Approach agreement, as well as other areas of practical co-operation that are to our mutual benefit.

The Government is committed to playing its full part in the delivery of these projects. The funding requirement in the years ahead will depend on the timing and details for projects being agreed on a North/South basis, and will need to take account of necessary discussions with the Executive through the North South Ministerial Council, the progress of implementation of each project, and, where relevant, our engagement with the British Government.

The Government has recognised that the North West region is in particular need of strategic investment. In this regard, the North West Strategic Growth Partnership, established in 2016 through the North South Ministerial Council, brings together senior Government officials from Government Departments North and South and other stakeholders to engage with Donegal County Council and Derry City and Strabane District Council to deliver on strategic priorities aimed at bringing real and positive change for the region.

The Government remains committed to continuing to support the work of the North West Strategic Growth Partnership and in the context of New Decade, New Approach is committed in principle to providing further funding of up to €2.5m to the North West Development Fund in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Executive.

The North West Strategic Growth Partnership will also provide an important forum through which discussions with relevant regional stakeholders can be advanced.

The Government welcomes the development of plans for ambitious new higher education provision at the Magee Campus to Derry, including in the context of the British Government's City Deal and Inclusive Future Fund initiative which is being advanced by Derry City and Strabane District Council. This investment can support more access to third-level education for young people on a cross-border basis, enable further cooperation between third-level institutions in the North West including in research and innovation, and underpin broader economic development and opportunities in the region.

International Agreements

452. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if Ireland has joined or plans to join the Covid-19 technology access pool initiative led by Costa Rica and the World Health Organization; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15916/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): Ireland welcomes Costa Rica's leadership on the Covid-19 Technology Access Pool. We note the leadership role of the EU and its Member States in drafting the Resolution, which recognises extensive immunisation against Covid-19 as a global public good for health, and in funding the Access to Covid-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator. We share the objectives for the initiative to achieve a common outcome in public health for the benefit of all.

Ireland has championed coherence, and coordinated and collaborative responses to the global public health challenges which we currently face, with a focus on ensuring that the needs of poorest and most vulnerable are served by our collective effort. The proposal touches on the work of a number of Government Departments and other stakeholders. My Department is consulting with relevant stakeholders with a view to considering practical engagement which will evolve as the WHO releases further details of the initiative.

Brexit Preparations

453. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the preparations for a post-Brexit deal between the European Union and the United Kingdom; the measures in place specifically if no deal is reached; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15794/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Government has always been clear that Brexit will mean change. Whatever the outcome of the EU-UK future relationship negotiations, the UK will leave the Single Market and the Customs Union at the end of the transition period. Therefore, even the best possible FTA between the EU and UK will impact supply chains and trade flows and will involve checks and controls in both directions on EU-UK trade.

With less than six months until the end of transition, work to ensure Government, business

and citizens are prepared is of the utmost importance. Yesterday I brought a Brexit Memo to Government including a comprehensive update on Brexit Readiness and Contingency Planning across Government. Given the limited progress in negotiations between the EU and the UK on a future partnership agreement, we have intensified preparations across all Departments on the basis of two scenarios: (i) a limited FTA (and accompanying fisheries agreement), or, (ii) no trade deal (i.e. a hard Brexit). While Ireland fully supports the closest possible relationship between the EU and UK, prudence dictates that we approach our planning on this basis.

In focusing on the two scenarios set out above, we will continue to undertake this work in three distinct but overlapping streams: work for which the Government is the lead; addressing the needs of sectors and business impacted by the UK's departure; and societal and citizen focused issues.

Since 2018, significant investment has been made in the infrastructure and systems required for the additional checks and controls for trade in both directions with the UK, at Dublin Port and Rosslare Europort, as well as at Dublin Airport. The work at Dublin Airport is now complete. Substantial work is also complete on a number of projects at Dublin and Rosslare Ports and further facilities will come on line by the end of 2020 to further enhance the capacity already in place.

The UK landbridge will continue to be of paramount strategic importance to EU operators, especially Irish operators, as a means of accessing the EU Single Market. Working with our partners, progress has been made on addressing concerns over checks and controls on goods moving under transit, including recently in relation to SPS checks under the new Official Controls Regulation. Even with these issues addressed, the way in which traders use the landbridge will change. A communications programme is planned to advise traders of these new processes.

Brexit comes at a time when businesses and the economy are already heavily impacted by the COVID19 crisis. The Government acted swiftly and decisively in terms of COVID-related supports to businesses. Brexit preparation will necessarily be part of a wider business recovery agenda and we will look at how best business supports can be deployed in support of Brexit readiness.

Our approach to readiness work will continue to be underpinned by a strong communications and stakeholder engagement programme. Central to this will be supporting business readiness for the new trading environment at the end of transition. I will continue to chair the Brexit Stakeholder Forum, which will meet again in the coming weeks.

On 29 May, the Government approved the preparation of a scheme for a new Brexit Omnibus Bill to ensure appropriate legislative underpinning of necessary mitigation measures. I expect this Bill will be brought before the Oireachtas in the autumn.

Preparations are also ongoing at EU level. On 9 July the Commission published a Communication on Readiness at the end of the transition period, focusing on the preparations that will be required for the changes inevitably arising in all scenarios when the UK will no longer participate in the EU's Single Market and Customs Union. The European Commission is currently updating its 102 readiness notices to provide useful advice to businesses and citizens on how to prepare for Brexit. These are available on the European Commission website.

The Withdrawal Agreement, including the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland, will apply at the end of the transition period regardless of the outcome of the EU-UK future relationship negotiations.

Preparing for the change that Brexit will bring is a key priority across Government. This

work has intensified and will continue in the period ahead. We remain committed to doing everything we can to ensure that citizens and businesses are as ready as they can be for the end of transition.

Diplomatic Representation

454. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the diplomatic missions, such as embassies and consulates, that were closed and not reopened as part of cost saving measures in the past ten years; if a cost analysis has been carried out on reopening the missions; and if so, the cost. [14660/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland's diplomatic Missions around the world play a critical role in promoting and advancing Ireland's interests through international engagement. A range of factors is taken into account in considering representation overseas, including political, economic, foreign policy, trade and development priorities, as well as the availability of resources. The Mission network performs a wide range of functions in support of Ireland's wider foreign policy interests, including representing and advancing Government policies, in particular in the context of the European Union and at the United Nations, economic and cultural promotion and development co-operation. They work very closely with State Agencies in the promotion of exports, tourism and inward investment. They provide frontline consular and passport services to citizens overseas, engaging with and supporting Irish communities overseas.

In 2011, the then Government decided that it was necessary to close Ireland's Embassy in Iran, due to the acute budgetary pressures the country was under at that time. This decision was taken following a comprehensive review of our overseas diplomatic network in which particular attention was paid to the promotion of our economic interests. The Embassy of Ireland in Ankara is now accredited on a non-residential basis to Iran and supports our broad policy objectives, including the development of political relations, trade relations and supporting the needs of Irish businesses operating or hoping to operate there. Ireland is also represented in Iran by an Honorary Consul. Honorary Consuls are an important element of the State's global engagement and provide consular services and assistance, as well as a range of other supports to citizens.

A decision was taken to close our Representative Office in Dili, Timor Leste in 2011. Ireland continues to have a very strong bilateral relationship with Timor Leste, through our Embassy in Singapore which is accredited to Timor Leste, and through Ireland's Partnership Strategy for Small Island Developing States.

In 2014 the Embassy of Ireland in the Kingdom of Lesotho was closed following a decision taken in the context of a review of Ireland's overall overseas diplomatic network. Ireland continues to have rich bilateral engagement with Lesotho, including in respect of development cooperation, through our Embassy in the Republic of South Africa which is accredited the Kingdom of Lesotho.

The network of resident Irish diplomatic Missions overseas will continue to be kept under review, including in the context of the commitment, set out in the Programme for Government, to Global Ireland 2025, and its aim to double the impact of our global footprint, having due regard to available resources.

Foreign Conflicts

455. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the recent steps taken by Ireland, the EU and the international community to address the ongoing instability in Yemen; his plans to increase Irish Aid funding in view of the looming food insecurity crisis in the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14680/20]

456. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the status of the response by Ireland to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen; the actions he plans to take to offer support to the population of Yemen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14735/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 455 and 456 together.

Driven by the continued conflict, and worsened by the spread of COVID-19, Yemen remains the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with 80 per cent of the population in need of humanitarian assistance.

Ireland has so far this year provided €5 million in funding to the United Nations Yemen Humanitarian Fund (YHF). This Fund mobilises and channels funding to NGOs and UN agencies which have the capacity and are best placed to deliver lifesaving assistance to the most vulnerable. In total Ireland has given over €27 million in humanitarian aid directly to Yemen since 2015.

Ireland also provides significant humanitarian funding to Yemen through our contribution to global funds, including to the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund. Ireland is one of the top ten contributors to the CERF since its establishment in 2006. In 2019, the CERF provided €32 million in funding to Yemen. Funding has also been given to WHO and UNHCR specifically for their Global COVID-19 response.

As a Member State of the EU, Ireland also contributes to the EU response to the crisis in Yemen. Since the beginning of the conflict in 2015, the EU has allocated €484 million in humanitarian aid.

The roots of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen lies in conflict. Ireland and the EU fully support the efforts of the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, to bring about a political resolution to the conflict.

In particular, I welcome efforts made towards a Joint Declaration between the Government of Yemen and the Houthis that would commit the parties to a nationwide ceasefire, bring forward a number of economic and humanitarian measures, and resume a political process. However, despite the Special Envoy's efforts over the last three months, agreement has not been reached and the cycle of violence continues and has even increased in some areas.

Ireland calls again on the parties to the conflict to comply fully with their obligations under international humanitarian law, and to continue their engagement with the Special Envoy with a view to agreeing a declaration and ceasefire that will be in the best interests of the people of Yemen. Full, secure and unimpeded access for humanitarian and health workers and supplies to all of Yemen, in the spirit of Resolution 2532, would allow lifesaving assistance to reach those in greatest need.

Ministerial Responsibilities

457. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will pro-

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vide a copy of the departmental briefings received by him and each Minister of State in his Department upon taking up each individual role; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14804/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I refer to my previous reply to Parliamentary Question 14526/20. My Department will be arranging for the publication of briefing material, in accordance with the usual procedures, provided to me upon taking up my role as Minister for Foreign Affairs and to the Ministers of State assigned to this Department.

Covid-19 Pandemic

458. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will address a matter regarding foreign travel and self-isolation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14821/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): As the Deputy will be aware, my Department publishes Travel Advice for over 200 countries. The advice provides an objective assessment of the risks individuals could face if travelling overseas, with a view to helping them to make informed decisions for themselves. It is based on consultation with our Embassies and Consulates on the ground, the relevant local authorities in each country and our international partners, together with our domestic partners where appropriate. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the priority of protecting public health, we have worked particularly closely with the Department of Health and the HSE.

In mid-March, the Department issued a general advisory for the public to avoid all non-essential travel overseas, and the security status rating for each country was amended to reflect this advice. This advice initially applied until March 29, and was subsequently extended until further notice. The Government continues to advise against all non-essential travel overseas.

As the Deputy will understand, requirements and conditions for entry into the State are a matter for other Departments. However, I can advise that, at the time of writing, all entrants to the State, other than those coming from Northern Ireland, and certain exempted categories, are required by law to complete a Public Health Passenger Locator Form, and to submit it to the relevant authority at their port of entry. They should also restrict their movements for 14 days after arrival. Any further questions on this matter should be referred to the Department of Health.

The Government is considering a roadmap for the resumption of safe international travel, which is likely to include a ‘green list’ of countries.

The Deputy will appreciate that any issues relating to terms and conditions of flights, holiday packages, insurance policies or refunds should be pursued directly with the airline, tour operator or insurer.

Ministerial Responsibilities

459. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for EU affairs; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15040/20]

460. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for overseas development aid and

diaspora; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15047/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 459 and 460 together.

There are two Ministers of State at my Department, Thomas Byrne T.D. and Colm Brophy, T.D.. Minister Byrne was appointed Minister of State with responsibility for EU Affairs at my Department and at the Department of the Taoiseach on 1 July 2020. Minister Brophy was appointed Minister of State with responsibility for Overseas Development Aid and Diaspora at my Department on 1 July 2020.

The Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) (No.2) Act, 1977 provides for the delegation of statutory Ministerial powers and duties to Ministers of State. This may be done at the request of the Minister concerned, by Government Order.

My statutory powers as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade relate to consular, passport and other technical matters and it is not the practice, nor is it considered necessary, to delegate these functions.

Passport Services

461. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the turnaround times of passport applications since the resumption of services post Covid-19 restrictions. [15066/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Passport Service began a phased return to full operation on 8 June 2020. The Passport Service has processed over 65,000 books and cards since re-opening.. The Passport Service is currently meeting the target turnaround times for Passport Online applications.

This is 10 working days for simple applications and 20 working days for complex applications, once the supporting documentation has been received.

I encourage all applicants to apply via the Passport Online service which has won awards for its user-friendly process, including a NALA award for the use of plain English. If an applicant is not familiar with using a computer, a friend or relative with basic computer skills can help them to apply online – the process only takes ten minutes to complete. Passport Online can also facilitate social distancing, given that a renewal application for an adult does not require the signature of a witness.

Passport Online expanded in 2019 to include first time applicants, both children and adults, in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Great Britain and Europe. Irish citizens, including children, can also renew their passports online 24/7, from anywhere in the world.

Ministerial Meetings

462. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he has engaged with the Chinese authorities regarding events in Hong Kong; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15100/20]

476. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he has expressed to the Chinese Government his concern regarding the situation in Hong Kong,

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the new national security law and its implications for human rights; and if he has expressed his concern with the Chinese Government at the treatment of the Uighur minority in China and human rights breaches against them. [15358/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 462 and 476 together.

The Government is closely monitoring the situation in Hong Kong, following the adoption of a national security law on the 30 June by the Chinese National People's Congress.

I made a statement on the 1 July to express my concern at the adoption of this law and reiterated Ireland's full support for fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong, such as freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly. I also discussed the issue with the Chinese Ambassador.

The EU also issued a statement on this matter on the 1 July, which highlighted the EU's strong stake in the continued stability and prosperity of Hong Kong, and outlined our concerns regarding the conformity of this law with China's international commitments. The matter was also raised by the EU during the EU-China Summit on 22 June, and in a statement by the EU at UN Human Rights Council on 1 July.

The situation in Xinjiang is different to that in Hong Kong and both should be considered in their own right. Ireland and our EU partners remain deeply concerned about the credible reports of the treatment of ethnic Uighurs and other minorities in Xinjiang, including arbitrary detentions, widespread surveillance, restrictions on freedom of religious belief, and recent media reports of forced sterilisation in the region. We have raised our concerns with China in both bilateral and multilateral contexts, and, along with other EU partners, we will continue to do so.

Ireland joined a Joint Statement at the UN Third Committee in October 2019, and a Joint Letter at the UN Human Rights Council in July 2019, which outlined our concerns in the Xinjiang. The matter was also raised at EU level during the recent EU-China Summit, and in the EU statement at the UN Human Rights Council.

Additionally, on 30 June 2020 Ireland was one of 27 States to sign up to a Joint Statement at the UN Human Rights Council which reiterates our concerns in both Xinjiang and Hong Kong. The Joint Statement urges China to allow the High Commissioner for Human Rights meaningful access to Xinjiang at the earliest opportunity, and called on China to reconsider the introduction of the national security law in Hong Kong.

The protection and promotion of human rights is a core pillar of Ireland's foreign policy, and we will continue to monitor and assess these situations, and raise our concerns with the Chinese authorities bilaterally and in multilateral fora.

EU Data

463. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the number of Irish citizens who completed an official traineeship in the European Commission in each of the years 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15102/20]

464. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the number of Irish citizens who undertook the EU Concours competition in each of the years 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15103/20]

465. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the number of Irish citizens who passed the EU Concours competition in each of the years 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15104/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 463 to 465, inclusive, together.

Recruitment to the EU's Institutions is carried out centrally by the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO). EPSO regularly runs open competitions to recruit generalist and specialist EU civil servants. The most common form of entry to the EU Institutions is through the AD5 Generalist competition, which is the entry-level point for graduates. This competition is commonly referred to as the EU "concours".

Since 2015, five Irish citizens have passed the AD5 Generalist competition. Two Irish citizens were recruited in 2015, one in 2017 and two in 2018. EPSO did not hold an AD5 Generalist competition in 2016. The 2019 competition is ongoing and has been delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2015, 172 Irish citizens applied to sit the AD5 Generalist tests. In 2017, 167 submitted a valid application and in 2018, 176 Irish people submitted an application. The ongoing 2019 competition saw 191 Irish people submit an application.

In addition, since 2015 Irish citizens have also been recruited by the Institutions through other avenues, including through competitions run for specialists (e.g. recruitment competitions for auditors or lawyer-linguists) and through competitions that employ individuals on the basis of a temporary or fixed-term contract.

The Blue Book Traineeship programme is run by the European Commission on a six-monthly basis. Participation by Irish citizens in that programme since 2015 is as follows:

- 2015: 24
- 2016: 19
- 2017: 23
- 2018: 22
- 2019: 27
- 2020: 35

Irish citizens also take part in the Junior Professionals in Delegation Programme, which is run by the European External Action Service and the European Commission and places highly-qualified junior professionals from Member States in EU Delegations around the world. Similarly, the National Expert in Professional Training programme is open to Irish civil service, giving Irish officials the opportunity to have a short-term placement in the EU's Institutions.

It has become clear in recent years that there will soon be a significant reduction in the number of Irish officials in senior roles in the EU Institutions, as many high-ranking Irish officials will soon retire. At the current rates of recruitment of permanent staff, we are far below the replacement rate. This poses a serious challenge.

The Department of Foreign Affairs manages the EU Jobs campaign to promote careers in the EU in Ireland. The campaign publicises EU career opportunities, including traineeships, in Ireland's third-level institutions. The campaign also provides support to Irish citizens who have

applied for permanent jobs in the EU Institutions, providing information and advice for the duration of the recruitment competition.

Ireland's Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels dedicates significant resources to building and maintaining relations with Irish citizens working in the EU. It also provides Irish EU staff with assistance to help them advance to the highest levels of senior management in the Institutions.

In addition, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade manages the Centrally Funded Scheme for Seconded National Experts was established in 2014 to support the secondment of Irish Government officials to the EU. The scheme, which provides for secondments to international as well as EU institutions, has a budget of €1.8 million for 2020. To date in 2020, it has financed the secondment of twenty-four Irish officials to the EU Institutions.

Both programmes aim to increase Ireland's representation in the staffing of the EU's Institutions, though it is clear that more needs to be done in this area. The Programme for Government commits to the development of a new strategy to increase the presence of Irish people in the senior ranks of the EU Institutions. We will also aim to increase the number of young Irish people applying for traineeships in the EU's Institutions.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform continue to work together in analysing these issues, and in developing Ireland's overall policy approach to EU staffing. These will help to inform the new strategy. In addition, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform will reflect Ireland's EU careers objectives in the forthcoming Civil Service HR Strategy, and in workforce plans of Civil Service Departments and offices from 2020 onwards.

EU Data

466. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the number of Irish civil servants who are currently on secondment to EU institutions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15105/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): In 2013 the Government approved a range of measures to support the placement of Irish officials on secondment to the EU institutions and other international organisation as part of our efforts to maximise our influence internationally.

This included the establishment of a Centrally Funded Scheme, coordinated initially by the Department of the Taoiseach, and by my Department since 2017. The Centrally Funded Scheme covers the cost of secondments to the EU's Institutions and other international organisations, where these costs are not provided for by the host institution. On average, 24 secondments have been funded annually through the scheme. A total of 23 secondments have been funded to date in 2020. The scheme is vitally important in building up EU expertise within the civil service. All Government Departments and Agencies have access to funding through the scheme.

As well as the funding provided by the Centrally Funded Scheme, Government Departments and/or the EU Institutions also cover the costs of some secondments. In 2020, nine Irish officials were seconded to the EU's Institutions in this manner.

In addition to the secondees mentioned above, there are eight staff in my Department who are serving in assignments in the EU Institutions are assigned to the European External Action Service (EEAS), including one at Head of EU Delegation level.

The EEAS is the European Union's diplomatic service created to promote an EU-wide common foreign and security policy. It is staffed by officers from the EU Commission, the EU Council Secretariat and the Foreign Ministries of EU Member States, including my Department. The recruitment of diplomats from Member States to serve in the EEAS enhances the links and interaction with the diplomatic services of the Member States. My Department takes all reasonable steps to support the candidacies of Irish applicants for EEAS posts. Officers who are offered positions have been, and will continue to be, granted special leave for the duration of their assignments.

The Programme for Government makes a commitment to ensuring that Ireland is adequately represented in EU Institutions, including the EEAS. This will be an area of focus for my Department in recognition of the value of placing Irish civil servants in key positions to enhance our influence and contribute to the effective functioning of EU institutions.

Foreign Conflicts

467. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if Ireland will use its membership of the United Nations Security Council to push for resolution in respect of Western Sahara; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15185/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland's approach on the Security Council will be informed by our record as a country that has a consistent, principled and independent foreign policy. Ireland is now working on preparations for taking up our Security Council seat in January, including by reviewing all items on the Council's agenda, which includes the situation in Western Sahara.

Our position on the situation in Western Sahara remains one of support to the UN-led process and the Secretary-General's efforts to reach a definitive political settlement on this issue. We support the right to self-determination of the people of Western Sahara, but we do not have a view on the outcome of that decision – be it independence, integration, autonomy, or some other solution – so long as it is decided in a genuine exercise of self-determination.

This will remain our position when we take up our seat on the Security Council, and we will be ready to support all efforts to advance the UN-led process and reach a lasting settlement. We would like to see the appointment, as soon as possible, of a new UN Special Envoy, to take forward that process and build on the momentum which had been developing under the previous Special Envoy, Horst Köhler, before his departure last year.

Ireland continues to support the important work of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), where two members of Defence Forces personnel are currently deployed. On 30 October 2019, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2494, which extended the mandate of the Mission by 12 months. In extending the mandate of the Mission, the Security Council reaffirmed its commitment to assist the parties to achieve a just, lasting, and mutually acceptable political solution, based on compromise.

Passport Services

468. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the position regarding the processing of passports (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15189/20]

14 July 2020

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Passport Service begun a phased return to full operation on 8 June 2020. The Passport Service has processed over 65,000 books and cards since re-opening.. The Passport Service is currently meeting the target turnaround times for Passport Online applications.

This is 10 working days for simple applications and 20 working days for complex applications, once the supporting documentation has been received.

At present, there are over 29,000 Passport Online applications in the system. Of these, approximately two-thirds are awaiting further action from the application such as submitting supporting documentation or a suitable photograph.

The paper based application channel, Passport Express, will not re-commence until later in the summer. At present, there are approximately 200 applications received until March 2020 being processed.

Diplomatic Representation

469. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the location of each of Irish embassy and consulate across the world; and the staff complement in each embassy and consulate. [15193/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland's network of diplomatic and consular Missions around the world is critical to the achievement of our foreign policy objectives. The network also ensures efficient delivery of passport and consular services to our citizens, support to emigrant organisations and outreach to the diaspora and other networks of influence.

The work of my Department in promoting a more just, fair, secure and sustainable world continues through Mission engagement with multilateral institutions and agencies, including those of the United Nations, and via implementation of the development aid programme in partner countries. Activities of our multilateral Missions in New York and Geneva will be of increasing importance as Ireland prepares to take a seat on the UN Security Council on 1 January 2021 for a two year period. Our largest overseas Mission is the Permanent Representation in Brussels which brings together civil servants from almost every Government Department to promote and represent Ireland's interests in the EU.

Our staff in Embassies and Consulates also make a strong contribution to job creation, exports, tourism and education in Ireland by assisting Irish businesses overseas in close cooperation with State Agencies.

Our Missions are staffed by Departmental officers posted from headquarters; by staff seconded from other Government Departments in certain Missions, including the Permanent Representation in Brussels and visa officers seconded to Missions from the Department of Justice as set out in the table below.

LOCATION	TOTAL*
ABU DHABI	9
ABUJA	6
ADDIS ABABA	4
AMMAN	2
ANKARA	7

Questions - Written Answers

LOCATION	TOTAL*
ATHENS	2
ATLANTA	2
AUSTIN	2
BANGKOK	3
BEIJING	15
BERLIN	9
BERNE	2
BOGOTÁ	3
BOSTON	2
BRASILIA	2
BRATISLAVA	2
BRUSSELS (Emb.)	2
BRUSSELS (PERM REP/PfP)	98
BUCHAREST	2
BUDAPEST	2
BUENOS AIRES	2
CAIRO	3
CANBERRA	3
CARDIFF	2
CHICAGO	2
COPENHAGEN	2
DAR ES SALAAM	5
EDINBURGH	4
FRANKFURT	2
FREETOWN	3
GENEVA	11
HANOI	5
HELSINKI	2
HOLY SEE	1
HONG KONG	3
JAKARTA	2
KAMPALA	4
KUALA LUMPUR	2
LILONGWE	4
LISBON	2
LJUBLJANA	2
LONDON (incl PPO)	45
LOS ANGELES	2
LUSAKA	3
LUXEMBOURG	2
MADRID	5
MAPUTO	5
MEXICO	4
MONROVIA	2
MOSCOW	7
MUMBAI	2
NAIROBI	3
NEW DELHI	8

14 July 2020

LOCATION	TOTAL*
NEW YORK - C.G.	4
NEW YORK - PMUN	15
NICOSIA	2
O.S.C.E. Vienna	3
OSLO	2
OTTAWA	3
PARIS (incl OECD)	13
PRAGUE	2
PRETORIA	5
RAMALLAH	2
RIGA	2
RIYADH	2
ROME	5
SAN FRANCISCO	2
SANTIAGO de CHILE	2
SAO PAULO	2
SEOUL	2
SHANGHAI	3
SINGAPORE	2
SOFIA	2
STOCKHOLM	2
STRASBOURG	2
SYDNEY	2
TALLINN	2
TEL AVIV	2
THE HAGUE	4
TOKYO	5
VALLETTA	2
VANCOUVER	2
VIENNA	2
VILNIUS	2
WARSAW	4
WASHINGTON DC	11
WELLINGTON	2
Zagreb	2
TOTAL	451

*In addition to civil servant officers posted abroad, a number of technical, administrative, policy and development activities are carried out by staff recruited locally by Missions.

Diplomatic Representation

470. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if the premises of each Irish embassy are either owned or leased or rented by the State. [15194/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland's diplomatic and consular missions play a crucially important role in the achievement of foreign policy and economic objectives. Currently they occupy a total of 165 premises, of which 130 are rented and 35 are State-owned, as set out in the following table:

Questions - Written Answers

	Chancery/Of- ficeOwned	Official Resi- denceOwned	Combine- dOffice and Official Residence Owned	Chancery/Of- ficeRented	Official Resi- denceRented	Combine- dOffice and Official Residence Rented
Abu Dhabi				1	1	
Abuja				1	1	
Addis Ababa	1			1		
Amman				1	1	
Ankara		1		1		
Armagh				1	2	
Athens		1		1		
Atlanta				1		
Austin				1		
Bangkok				1	1	
Beijing				1		1
Belfast		1		1		
Berlin		1		1		
Berne		1		1		
Boston				1		
Bogota				1	1	
Brasilia		1		1		
Bratislava				1	1	
Brussels Embassy					1	
Brussels Pfp				1		
Brussels PR				1	3	
Bucharest				1	1	
Budapest				1	1	
Buenos Aires		1		1		
Cairo				1	1	
Canberra			1			
Cardiff				1		
Chicago				1		
Copenhagen	1	1				
Dar-es-Sa- laam	1	1				
Edinburgh				1		
Frankfurt CG				1		
Freetown				1	1	
Geneva				1	1	
Hanoi				1	1	
Helsinki				1	1	
Holy See				1	1	
Hong Kong				1		
Jakarta				1	1	
Kampala				1	1	
Kuala Lum- pur				1	1	
Lilongwe		1		1		
Lisbon		1		1		

	Chancery/Of- ficeOwned	Official Resi- denceOwned	Combine- dOffice and Official Residence Owned	Chancery/Of- ficeRented	Official Resi- denceRented	Combine- dOffice and Official Residence Rented
Ljubljana		1		1		
London				2	1	
Los Angeles				1	1	
Lusaka	1	1				
Luxembourg				1	1	
Madrid		1		1		
Maputo	1				1	
Mexico		1		1		
Monrovia				1	1	
Moscow						1
Nairobi				1	1	
New Delhi				1	1	
New York CG				1	1	
New York PMUN		1		1		
Nicosia				1	1	
Oslo		1		1		
Ottawa		1		1		
Paris Em- bassy			1			
Paris OECD					1	
Prague		1		1		
Pretoria (incl. Capetown)		1		2		
Ramallah				1	1	
Riga				1	1	
Riyadh			1			
Rome			1			
San Fran- cisco				1		
Santiago				1	1	
Sao Paulo				1		
Seoul				1	1	
Shanghai				1		
Singapore				1	1	
Sofia				1	1	
Stockholm		1		1		
Strasbourg	1				1	
Sydney				1		
Tallinn				1	1	
Tel Aviv				1	1	
The Hague	1	1				
Tokyo				1	1	
Valletta				1	1	
Vancouver				1		

	Chancery/Office Owned	Official Residence Owned	Combine-d Office and Official Residence Owned	Chancery/Office Rented	Official Residence Rented	Combine-d Office and Official Residence Rented
Vienna Embassy				1	1	
Vienna OSCE					1	
Vilnius				1	1	
Warsaw				1	1	
Washington	1	1				
Zagreb				1	1	
Wellington				1	1	
Sub-Total	8	23	4	78	50	2

Diplomatic Representation

471. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the new build and purchase programme for embassies undertaken over the past ten years. [15195/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Embassy network plays a key role in the pursuit of Ireland’s foreign policy objectives. At present, the Department is responsible for the management of 166 properties comprising of Embassies, Consulates General, Permanent Missions, Permanent Representations, Secretariats, Representative Offices and official accommodation

Ireland’s diplomatic network has expanded significantly in recent years following the launch of “Global Ireland” in 2018. The locations for new Missions agreed by Government were identified on the basis of maximising impact in promoting Ireland’s economic and political interests; expanding our influence in terms of values and in delivering clear benefits for the State.

Properties are purchased in locations where there is a clear economic advantage to owning rather than renting property and where the necessary funds are available. Properties are otherwise leased following due diligence including on health and safety, accessibility and value for money criteria.

The following overseas properties have been purchased since 2010:-

- Lilongwe Official Accommodation purchased in 2017
- Tokyo site for new Ireland House and official accommodation in 2017
- Property neighbouring the Embassy in Washington D.C. to extend space in 2018

The following new builds have been completed or initiated since 2010:-

- Addis Ababa, Ethiopia - Chancery completed in 2010
- Tokyo, Japan - Ireland House and Official Accommodation - ongoing
- Abuja, Nigeria - Chancery and Official Accommodation - ongoing

Overseas Development Aid

472. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the role of embassy staff in the allocation and distribution of overseas foreign aid; and the amount of such aid per embassy in each of the past five years. [15199/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): Annual financial allocations of overseas foreign aid are approved by an Interdepartmental Committee under Vote 27 (International Cooperation). Over the past five-year period (2015 to 2019), aid expenditure totalling €740,975,324 has been channelled via thirteen Irish Missions, including Embassies, in Africa, Asia and Palestine. Details are set out below.

Allocations managed by Ireland's Missions abroad are made in line with clearly defined objectives and indicative annual budgets set out in approved Mission Strategies, normally covering five year periods.

Embassy staff play a key role in planning Mission Strategies, programming, distributing, monitoring and evaluating grants to partner organisations. A standard approach to grant management is in place in relation to all expenditure under Vote 27, including through Missions, for all grants made to partner organisations. It provides a framework for evidence-based decision-making, accountability in terms of expenditure and results and allows for a routine and rigorous consideration of risk.

This approach is aligned to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's Public Spending Code and grant management circular (Circular 13/2014), providing structure to the manner in which value for money considerations are reflected in the allocation of, and reporting on public funds.

Expenditure of Ireland's overseas foreign aid by mission 2015-2019:

Missions	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Ethiopia	27,829,913	29,210,332	28,993,115	29,689,145	31,986,723	147,709,228
Kenya	236,510	493,040	451,299	802,858	1,000,000	2,983,706
Liberia	5,463,631	1,889,823	2,382,763	2,986,226	2,468,690	15,191,132
Malawi	12,637,263	13,710,375	13,599,017	14,859,389	15,520,540	70,326,584
Mozambique	33,566,005	24,426,273	25,049,059	19,481,467	24,317,367	126,840,170
Nigeria				66,015	96,450	162,465
Palestine	4,700,000	4,400,000	4,887,709	8,178,810	12,720,430	34,886,949
Sierra Leone	5,302,148	6,264,573	6,618,997	6,441,303	8,066,079	32,693,101
South Africa	5,680,120	5,940,244	5,908,497	6,150,366	6,723,791	30,403,018
Tanzania	25,521,309	21,902,561	17,091,553	20,875,097	19,129,096	104,519,616
Uganda	15,974,734	17,530,497	17,815,820	19,238,898	13,562,747	84,122,696
Vietnam	11,933,229	10,985,925	9,976,067	10,026,514	9,966,061	52,887,796
Zambia	13,725,485	7,795,700	9,213,676	3,412,639	4,101,362	38,248,861
Total	162,570,348	144,549,343	141,987,571	142,208,726	149,659,335	740,975,324

International Agreements

473. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the legal analysis on the revised international legally binding instrument to regulate in international human rights law the activities of transnational corporations and other business enterprises that has been conducted by a group of EU countries including Ireland; when this analysis will be publicly available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15238/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland has exchanged

views with a number of other interested EU Member States on the draft legally binding instrument circulated last year by the chair of the inter-governmental working group. Ireland has not undertaken a formal legal analysis in respect of the draft instrument with other EU Member States and the exchange of views that we have had with other MS is intended to inform policy deliberations on the EU's approach to the issue.

As with all exchanges of views with other EU Member States on policy issues, the views that other Member States have shared with us in this context have been shared confidentially. I do not therefore intend to comment publicly on policy formulation on this issue that is underway in other Member States.

As noted in replies to previous parliamentary questions, Ireland is open to looking at options for progress on a legally binding treaty. With regard to its scope, we believe that all economic operators, whether transnational or purely domestic, should be treated in a non-discriminatory manner. We would also wish to see essential human rights principles reflected in any possible instrument, which should reaffirm the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of human rights and stress the primary responsibility of States under existing human rights obligations to protect against human rights violations. We would also like to see any new initiative build on, rather than duplicate, existing measures such as the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises and the ILO Tripartite Declaration of Principles Concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy. Above all we believe that it should be rooted in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

I would also note that the European Commissioner for Justice, Didier Reynders, recently announced plans by the European Commission to develop a legislative proposal by 2021, aimed at requiring businesses to carry out due diligence in relation to the potential human rights and environmental impacts of their operations and supply chains.

Ministerial Meetings

474. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he has spoken formally to his Japanese counterpart to date in 2020. [15264/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland enjoys excellent relations with Japan, fostered by strong cooperation at all levels, both here and in Japan. Since my meeting in December last with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Toshimitsu Motegi, we have exchanged a number of letters covering topics such as the ongoing COVID-19 situation and Ireland's election to the UN Security Council, and have also reaffirmed our mutual commitment to growing the ambition of our bilateral relationship.

Foreign Birth Registration

475. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade when the foreign birth registration unit will recommence the processing of applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15356/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Foreign Births Registration (FBR) team was reassigned to our consular services at the beginning of the current public health emergency to operate a COVID-19 crisis call centre, assisting our citizens abroad.

Foreign Births Registration, by its nature, can be a detailed and complex process, often

involving official documentation related to three generations and issued by several jurisdictions. The Department has seen an increase in the number of applications received, from approximately 6,000 applications in 2015 to over 32,000 in 2019. Almost 10,000 applications have been submitted to date this year. There are currently 27,000 applications waiting to be processed.

Applications that have been sent to the FBR team are being held securely and will be processed when normal services resume later in the summer. The expected processing time for FBR applications is between 12 and 18 months. *Question No. 476 answered with Question No. 462.*

Human Rights

477. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the recent steps taken by Ireland, the EU and the international community to address the arbitrary arrests of peaceful demonstrators and issues regarding forcibly disappeared persons by the Assad regime in Syria; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15457/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): Over the past nine years in Syria, deliberate repression by the Assad regime against its own people has caused enormous suffering.

Ireland has provided financial support to the UN International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism, which was established to gather evidence of abuses and facilitate accountability. Ireland has also called on numerous occasions for the situation in Syria to be referred to the International Criminal Court.

Despite the fear which the regime spreads, there are recent reports of people peacefully protesting in Government-controlled areas in southern Syria - and also reports that many of them have been detained. We support their right to freedom of assembly.

The Syrian Government has not varied its repression over the last decade, despite sustained international pressure. Ireland and the EU have repeatedly condemned violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law perpetrated by the Syrian regime and other actors such as ISIS, some of which may constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity.

In the absence of a consensus at the UN on implementing sanctions, the EU has imposed its own sanctions regime on Syria, which includes bans on exports of arms, of goods which could be used for internal repression, and goods which could be used to make chemical weapons. A number of individuals against whom there is evidence of significant human rights abuses in Syria are also subject to individual EU sanctions.

Ireland has worked both at the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council to highlight infringements of human rights in Syria. On 22 June 2020, for example, Ireland co-sponsored a Resolution at the Human Rights Council which condemned the use of arbitrary arrest, arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances by the Syrian authorities, demanded the immediate release of all persons arbitrarily detained, and noted the importance of ensuring justice for all those detained. Ireland also noted several concerns relating to violations of international law and human rights abuses in Syria in a national statement delivered at the Human Rights Council on 10 March.

Ireland will continue to call on all parties in Syria to ensure protection of human rights. The EU has made very clear, over a period of many years, our strong condemnation of the human

rights abuses perpetrated by the Assad regime. We will continue to prioritise this issue in the context of our forthcoming tenure on the Security Council for 2021/2022.

Referendum Campaigns

478. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade when it is planned to hold a referendum on presidential voting rights for those living outside the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15847/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): We are committed to holding a referendum on extending the franchise at Presidential elections to Irish citizens living outside the State.

The Government will shortly restore the Thirty-Ninth Amendment of the Constitution (Presidential Elections) Bill to the Dáil Order Paper.

The date for the holding of the referendum will be decided once the legislation has been approved by the Oireachtas.

Ministerial Meetings

479. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he has spoken to the ambassador to Russia since 1 April 2020. [15940/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I most recently addressed our Heads of Mission, including our Ambassador to Russia, Ambassador McElduff, at the recent virtual European Heads of Mission conference held on 29 June. I have regular engagement with Irish Ambassadors across our Mission network as part of my role, as do my Minister of State colleagues and senior officials at my Department. Acting on my behalf, officials from my Department engage directly with our Ambassador to Russia on a very regular basis.

Public Inquiries

480. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the number of tribunals, public investigations and commissions of investigations in process; the length of time each has been under way; when each will conclude; the cost to date of each; and the estimated cost of each at completion. [16144/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): There are no tribunals, public investigations or commissions of investigations underway within my Department.

Defence Forces Personnel

481. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Defence the way in which the aide de camp (details supplied) for the Tánaiste can be justified; and the amount this will cost. [14985/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Tánaiste is a constitutional appointment, and is required to act in the place of the Taoiseach during his or her temporary absence.

Under the Partnership Government, there is a plan in place to facilitate a rotating Taoiseach. The current Tánaiste will become Taoiseach and vice versa. Furthermore, the Taoiseach and Tánaiste will both be conducting a number of public roles including State occasions.

Consequently, both the Taoiseach and Tánaiste will retain an Aide de Camp (ADC) in order to fulfil the greater level of representation at public functions and other duties.

The aide-de-camp will be a serving officer of the Permanent Defence Force and will hold the rank of Captain. The appointment will be made from within the existing establishment for Officers of that rank and will incur no extra cost.

The proposed tenure of this position will be for the duration of this Government.

Defence Forces Deployment

482. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Defence if he will provide details of peacekeeping missions until 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15101/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): As of 8 July 2020, Ireland is contributing 541 personnel to 10 different missions throughout the world. The main overseas missions in which Defence Forces personnel are currently deployed are the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) with 321 personnel and the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) in Syria with 134 personnel.

In relation to UNDOF, Defence Forces personnel are currently based in Camp Faouar on the Syrian side of the area of separation. On 12 June 2020, the Government approved the continued participation of the Defence Forces in UNDOF for a 12 month period up to June 2021.

The UNIFIL mission in Lebanon continues to represent Ireland's largest overseas deployment and on 15 May 2020 the Government approved the continued participation of the Defence Forces in UNIFIL for a further 12 month period. Irish troops are currently serving as part of a joint Irish-Polish Battalion in UNIFIL.

Other missions in which Defence Forces personnel are currently deployed are the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) with 13 personnel; MINUSMA, the UN authorised operation in Mali with 13 personnel, the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO) in Israel and Syria with 10 personnel, the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) with two (2) personnel, the EUFOR mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina with five (5) personnel, the NATO-led international security presence (KFOR) in Kosovo with 13 personnel and the EU Naval mission (Operation Iriini) with three (3) personnel. Ireland also contributes observers and staff to various United Nations and OSCE missions and personnel to staff appointments at UN, EU, NATO/PfP and OSCE headquarters.

The Department of Defence constantly reviews the deployment of Defence Forces personnel overseas. With regard to any future deployments of Defence Forces personnel overseas, Ireland receives requests from time to time in relation to participation in various missions and these are considered on a case-by-case basis.

Ireland has always been a strong supporter of the United Nations and UN Peacekeeping. Our commitment and support for the primary role of the United Nations, in the maintenance of international peace and security, is expressed in Ireland's long-standing tradition of participating in UN peacekeeping operations. This commitment is also expressed in our engagement in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

Defence Forces Representative Organisations

483. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Defence his views on an organisation being affiliated to a union (details supplied). [14695/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): As this matter is currently the subject of legal proceedings, the Deputy will appreciate that it would be inappropriate for me to comment.

Ministerial Responsibilities

484. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Defence if he will provide a copy of the departmental briefings received by him and each Minister of State in his Department upon taking up each individual role; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14800/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): A copy of the Ministerial Brief, provided following my recent appointment as Minister for Defence, has been published on my Department's website. Where there are any redactions, these are line with the provisions of Freedom of Information legislation.

Defence Forces Strength

485. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence the extent to which he plans to increase and stabilise the strength of the Defence Forces at all levels across the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15003/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The report of the Public Service Pay Commission (PSPC) of 2019 contains a range of recommendations aimed at improving work-force planning, recruitment and conditions of service for members of the Defence Forces. A High Level Plan to give effect to the recommendations of the PSPC is being implemented.

It should be noted that as the High Level Implementation Plan contains short, medium and long term measures, the full impact of these measures will take time to determine. There are also a range of external variables which impact on recruitment and retention and which can change and these will be carefully monitored to assess their effect as they arise.

While the Government remains committed to returning to, and maintaining the agreed strength of the Irish Permanent Defence Force of 9,500 personnel, the capacity of the Defence Forces to induct and train recruits has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 situation. This has resulted in the postponement of the majority of inductions in the year to date.

The military authorities have advised that, while the Defence Forces are now resuming inductions and training, taking public health guidelines into account. The Defence Forces continue to assess the impact such public health guidelines will have on their training capacity. A campaign to re-enlist former members of the Permanent Defence Force, to fill certain vacancies, is also underway.

The Programme for Government contains a range of commitments aimed at stabilising and restoring the strength of the Defence Forces. An independent Commission will be established to undertake a comprehensive review of the medium and longer term defence requirements of the State. This review will include, inter alia, consideration of pay, allowances, recruitment retention and career progression of members of the Defence Forces. It is also intended that on com-

pletion of this review, a permanent pay review body for the Defence Forces will be established.

Naval Service

486. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence if funding will be secured for the 20 mm secondary gun replacement on each Naval Service ship. [15279/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My priority as Minister 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 being 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 recently published Equipment Development Plan (EDP) is a plan for the continued re-equipment of the Defence Forces, which was devised in tandem with the White Paper policies. The EDP is being funded under the National Development Plan – Project Ireland 2040. The EDP provides a comprehensive indicative list of planned equipment projects which will be advanced over the next five years.

The current 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.

Included in the EDP is the replacement of the Naval Service 20mm secondary guns at an estimated cost of €12 million. Funding has been secured for this project and the indicative project timeframe for this project is between 2020 to 2022 and it is planned to publish a tender competition later in the year.

The replacement of secondary armaments on the entire Naval Service fleet will modernise the fleet and maintain operational effectiveness while bridging the gap between the primary and the tertiary armaments. I am satisfied that the Defence Forces have the necessary equipment 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.

Defence Forces Equipment

487. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence if funding for the upgrade of explosive ordnance disposal robots will be provided. [15280/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My priority as Minister 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 being 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.

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Included in the EDP is the upgrade of the explosive ordnance disposal robots. This project which is security sensitive commenced in 2012 and is due for completion in 2020 at a total cost of some €5 million. The enhanced robots are deployed by the Ordnance Corps of the Defence Forces both at home and on overseas operations. They are vital tools in the identification and destruction of improvised explosive devices in a manner that is both effective and safe to the operators and the public.

I am satisfied that the Defence Forces have the necessary equipment 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.

Defence Forces Properties

488. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence when construction works will commence on a new headquarter block for the Army Ranger Wing at the Defence Forces training centre; and the timeframe for the completion of this project. [15281/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Defence Forces Built Infrastructural Programme 2020-2025 was published in January 2020. This Programme, which is a 5 year plan, provides a blueprint for investment in the Defence Forces built infrastructure over a multi annual timeframe. As part of this programme, I can confirm that the construction of a new headquarter block for the Army Ranger Wing at the Defence Forces Training Centre is included in the Plan. The development of strategic infrastructure of this nature will be progressed further as the Plan is implemented. The programme will ensure that the required capital funding is prioritised as building activities increase over the lifetime of the Programme.

Public Sector Pensions

489. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Defence if a full review will take place in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15328/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Army Pensions Acts provide for the grant of pensions and gratuities to former members of the Permanent Defence Force (PDF) in respect of permanent disablement due to a wound or injury attributable to military service (whether at home or abroad) or due to disease attributable to or aggravated by overseas service with the United Nations.

Section 13(2) of the Army Pensions Act, 1923, as amended, provides that “Any compensation which may be received from or on behalf of the person alleged to be responsible for the act which caused the wounding ... may be taken into consideration in fixing the amount of any pension, allowance or gratuity which might be awarded under this Act to or in respect of such person and if such compensation is received after the award of any such pension or allowance the Minister may review the award and, having regard to the amount of such compensation, either terminate or reduce the amount thereof.”

The underlying objective of section 13(2) is to take into consideration compensation paid ‘on the double’ from any source for the same disablement.

In April 1986 the person in question was awarded a disability pension under the Army Pensions Acts in respect of an injury sustained while serving in the PDF. The person in question also instituted civil proceedings in respect of the same injury and was awarded compensation by the High Court. The disability pension payable was therefore reviewed under the provisions of section 13(2) of the 1923 Act and it was decided to reduce it by the annuity value of the total compensation which he had received.

Subsequently, the person in question applied to the High Court for a judicial review of the decision to reduce the disability pension. The High Court quashed the decision to reduce the disability pension and ordered that the matter be considered anew. A fresh review of the disability pension was accordingly undertaken. All aspects of the case (including, in particular, representations made by his solicitors) were fully considered and in March 1988 the then Minister decided to reduce the disability pension payable by the annuity value of the total compensation received by the person in question.

I am satisfied that the disability pension in this case was properly determined in accordance with the relevant statutory provisions by the then Minister and I do not believe that a further review of the decision under Section 13(2) would be appropriate.

Finally, any increases which were due under the terms of the Public Service Stability Agreement (PSSA) 2018-2020 (and previous pay agreements) have been applied to date to the pension payable to the person in question.

Defence Forces Properties

490. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Defence the reason the Army has pulled out of selling a house at a location (details supplied) to the tenant despite having agreed to the sale on three different occasions. [15338/20]

492. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Defence the plans of the Army for the

12 houses situated at a location (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15340/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 490 and 492 together.

I am advised that my Department was not in a position to dispose of the properties referred to because of legal difficulties in relation to the site.

After taking all matters into consideration, and based on the legal advices, my Department had no alternative but to withdraw from the offer of sale. Those who were offered the opportunity to purchase were informed in writing, through their legal advisers, of the sale withdrawal in November 2018. As part of this communication, my Department indicated its intention to regularise the current occupancy of those effected. A draft licence was issued through legal representatives for their agreement. This matter is ongoing and is the subject of continued legal correspondence.

My Department seeks to continue to regularise Overholding matters without recourse to legal action where possible. The provision of housing for members of the public is a matter in the first instance for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and my Department assists in any way it can in support of such applications for assistance, when requested to do so.

In the circumstances, the Deputy will appreciate that I am not in a position to comment further.

Defence Forces Properties

491. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Defence the reason the Army is refusing to perform vital maintenance works on a property (details supplied) but will not give the tenant permission to perform the works themselves; the reason the Army is failing to keep its properties to acceptable living standard as other landlords are instructed to do; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15339/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Member of the Defence Forces who were allocated a Married Quarter and who subsequently retire or leave are required under Regulation to return vacant possession of that property. Where the property is not vacated those remaining in the property, be they the former serving member, their spouse, children and/or other person, are regarded as Overholding.

It was brought to my Department's attention that the property referred to was occupied by a person unknown to the Department. My Department has no agreement with the current occupant that allows her remain in the property and cannot accede to her requests to carry out the works.

When maintenance issues are brought to the attention of my Department in relation to properties occupied by Overholders, matters of a Health and Safety concern are dealt with.

Finally, my Department seeks to continue to regularise Overholding matters without recourse to legal action where possible. However, the provision of housing for members of the public is a matter in the first instance for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and my Department assists in any way it can in support of such applications for assistance, when requested to do so.

Question No. 492 answered with Question No. 490.

Defence Forces Data

493. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Defence the strength of the Permanent Defence Force as of 30 June 2020; if he will provide a breakdown of each rank across the three services; the gender breakdown of same, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15609/20]

495. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Defence the number of additional recruits to the Permanent Defence Force to date in 2020 with regard to each of the three services; the gender breakdown of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15611/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 493 and 495 together.

The attached tables contain the information requested by the Deputy.

The Government remains committed to returning to, and maintaining the agreed strength of each branch of the Irish Permanent Defence Force. However, the capacity of the Defence Forces to induct and train recruits has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 situation. This has resulted in the postponement of the majority of inductions in the year to date.

The military authorities have advised that, while the Defence Forces continued those aspects of the induction process that could be conducted remotely throughout the year, they are now resuming inductions and training, taking public health guidelines into account. The Defence Forces continue to assess the impact such public health guidelines will have on their training capacity. A campaign to re-enlist former members of the Permanent Defence Force, to fill certain vacancies, is also underway.

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2020-07-14_pq493-495-14-07-18_en.xlsx “>Rank, Service and Gender]

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2020-07-14_pq493-14-07-20a_en.xlsx “>Inductions by Branch and Gender]

Defence Forces Reserve

494. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Defence the strength of the Reserve Defence Force as of 30 June 2020 with regard to each of the three services and each rank; the gender breakdown of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15610/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Reserve Defence Force (RDF) is comprised of the First Line Reserve (FLR), the Army Reserve (AR) and the Naval Service Reserve (NSR).

The most up to date figures available for the effective strength of the Army Reserve (AR) and Naval Service Reserve (NSR), as of 31 May 2020, are set out below:

EFFEC-TIVE	LT COL	COMDT	CAPT	LT	TOTAL OFFR	SM	BQMS	CS	CQMS	SGT	CPL	TOTAL NCO	PTE	TOTAL
AR	5	46	78	100	229	1	4	28	42	223	289	587	725	1541
NSR	0	4	7	5	16	0	4	5	0	7	25	41	65	122

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The breakdown of females of the Army Reserve and Naval Service Reserve for the same period is as follows:-

EFFEC-TIVE	LT COL	COMDT	CAPT	LT	TOTAL OFFR	SM	BQMS	CS	CQMS	SGT	CPL	TOTAL NCO	PTE	TOTAL
AR	0	3	10	18	31	0	0	0	2	14	55	71	101	203
NSR	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	4	4	13	19

The substantive strength of the First line Reserve for the same period is as follows:-

FORMATION*	OFFR	NCO	PTE	TOTAL
ARMY	1	13	137	151
AIR CORPS		4	21	25
NAVAL SERVICE	3	14	87	104
TOTAL	4	31	245	280

*The gender breakdown of the FLR is not available

End of month returns are collated at the mid-month point of the following month and hence June 2020 returns are still being compiled by the military authorities.

Question No. 495 answered with Question No. 493.

Defence Forces Data

496. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Defence the number of additional recruits to the Reserve Defence Force to date in 2020 with regard to each of the three services; the gender breakdown of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15612/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am advised by the military authorities that 32 new members have been inducted into the Army Reserve (AR) and Naval Service Reserve (NSR) from 1 January to 8 July 2020, broken down as follows:

	Total number inducted	Number of females inducted
Army Reserve	30	3
Naval Service Reserve	2	0

While a recruitment campaign for the AR and NSR was opened in March 2020, the ability to conduct RDF inductions has been impacted heavily by the Covid 19 crisis.

The Government remains committed to on-going recruitment in the AR and NSR. I am advised that, while there are no specific dates as of yet, it is anticipated that another recruitment campaign for the AR and NSR will be opened in autumn 2020.

Departmental Budgets

497. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Defence if the defence budget, specifically Vote 36, is on profile; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15613/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Vote 36 Defence was allocated a gross funding provision of €781 million for 2020. This allocation provides for the pay and allowances of over 10,400 public service employees, the upgrade and replacement of essential military equipment and infrastructure, ongoing Defence Forces operational and standing costs as well as funding in respect of Civil Defence and the Irish Red Cross Society.

Gross expenditure to the end of June 2020 was €337 million, representing 43% of the De-

fence Vote allocation. This level of expenditure is some €28.6 million (7.8%) below profile and is broadly in line with expenditure trends in recent years.

Recruitment plans to date this year have been impacted by COVID 19 and expenditure trends on pay subheads reflect this. In that context, the military authorities have advised that they are currently finalising plans to re-commence collective training and recruitment, taking public health guidelines into account. On non-pay subheads, progress on some planned projects has been delayed in the first half of the year, however, a significant number of projects are expected to advance before year-end.

My Department will continue to monitor expenditure on the Vote over the coming months and at this stage it is expected that overall expenditure outturn will be substantially in line with provision at year-end.

Public Inquiries

498. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Defence the number of tribunals, public investigations and commissions of investigations in process; the length of time each has been under way; when each will conclude; the cost to date of each; and the estimated cost of each at completion. [16142/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): There are no tribunals, public investigations, or commissions of investigations in process within the remit of my Department.

Student Accommodation

499. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the options open to third level students whose private landlords refused to provide rent refunds to students forced to leave accommodation due to Covid-19; her plans to encourage landlords to provide refunds; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14708/20]

500. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if all third-level institutions have provided rent refunds to students impacted by Covid-19; the supports available for students unable to obtain refunds from private landlords; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14709/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 499 and 500 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 students who were residing in university-owned accommodation will receive pro-rata refunds if they vacated their accommodation due to the Covid-19 pandemic. While I would wish to see the same principle applied in the case of students who were residing in privately owned student accommodation, it is not within the remit of my Department to direct any accommodation provider to offer a refund.

Refund or cancellation policies in student accommodation should be set out in the licence agreement signed at the beginning of the academic year. In the first instance students should engage with their accommodation provider to see if an arrangement can be reached in regard to a refund.

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 by email at ssa@rtb.ie.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

501. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the supports that will be put in place for national schools (details supplied) with regard to children attending from a local direct provision centre; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14745/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is committed to supporting all schools in enrolling children residing in accommodation centres operated by the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS), under the system known as direct provision, in a fair and transparent manner.

All pupils enrolled qualify for capitation grants; pro-rata capitation is also provided for each pupil enrolled after 30th September, provided the child was not previously enrolled in a school in the State.

The Special Education Teaching allocation provides a single unified allocation for special educational support teaching needs to each school, based on each school's educational profile. The Special Education Teacher allocation allows schools to provide additional teaching support for all pupils who require such support in their schools and for schools to deploy resources based on each pupil's individual learning needs. It gives greater flexibility to schools as to how they can deploy their resources, to take account of the actual learning needs pupils have, as opposed to being guided by a particular diagnosis of disability, and schools are guided as to how they should make such allocation decisions.

My Department has published guidelines for schools as to how they should utilise and deploy their resources under the new allocation model, which are available at www.education.ie.

The guidelines support schools in how they identify pupils for additional teaching support and decide how much support to provide for pupils who need it.

In addition to the above, procedures are in place if schools can demonstrate that they have high concentrations of pupils requiring English as an Additional Language (EAL) support. Schools can lodge an appeal to the Staffing Appeals Board for a review of staffing allocation for EAL support in accordance with the procedures set out in the primary (0018/20) school staffing schedule circulars.

My Department's National Educational Psychological Service works through a problem solving and solution oriented consultative approach to support schools to identify and meet the needs of individual pupils. NEPS psychologists can provide advice and guidance to Principals and teachers in relation to individual students' needs and in the development of whole school approaches to support inclusion, participation and integration. In addition, NEPS psychologists support schools to implement early-intervention and prevention programmes, such as The Incredible Years Programme in Primary Schools and resilience building programmes, such as the FRIENDS Programmes at Primary and Post Primary levels. Should the schools, to whom the Deputy refers in his question, have concerns in relation to the social, emotional or educational development of any of their pupils it remains open to them to raise these issues with their assigned NEPS psychologist with a view to the psychologist becoming directly involved with the pupil, where appropriate.

14 July 2020

The purpose of the School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Needs is to provide a reasonable level of transport service for children with a diagnosed disability and/or special educational need. My Department allocates funding to schools to enable them to employ escorts on school transport services, these escorts are specifically engaged by the schools to cater for children with special educational needs whose care requirements are such as to necessitate continuous support. While the children who were sanctioned the assistance of a school bus escort continue to remain on their existing services, my Department will continue to provide funding for the escorts appointed to continue to remain on these services with the child who has special educational needs.

School Transport

502. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills her plans to review whether the age of vehicles operating school transport services can be safely extended to 25 years subject to six monthly CVRT testing; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15005/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department.

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

In the 2019/2020 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were 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.

With regard to extending the age of vehicles operating School Transport services, Bus Éireann sets the standard it requires in relation to services operating as part of the School Transport Scheme. In the interest of maintaining the highest standards of safety it is not permitted to operate any bus older than 20 years on school transport services. This standard applies to both vehicles operated by Bus Éireann and those procured from private operators. There are no plans at present to change the current age profile of vehicles operating services as part of the School Transport Scheme.

School Transport

503. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills her plans to review whether the age limit for drivers within the school transport system can be safely increased to 75 years of age in line with other drivers on other services subject to medical certification; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15006/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department.

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

In the 2019/2020 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with

special educational needs, were 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.

It is Bus Éireann policy that the normal retirement age for all staff is currently 66 years. Bus Éireann part-time school bus drivers and drivers nominated by private operators as school bus drivers may continue to perform this role, subject to completing an annual medical examination up to the retirement age of 70 years.

This criteria is applied to all drivers who provide services as part of the School transport scheme that is operated by Bus Éireann, on behalf of the Department of Education and skills. As this age limit has been examined previously and the retirement age extended to 70 years, there are no plans to extend this limit further at this point in time.

School Transport

504. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a person over 70 years of age is permitted to drive a school bus; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15319/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department.

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

In the current 2019/2020 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were 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.

It is Bus Éireann policy that the normal retirement age for all staff is currently 66 years. Bus Éireann part-time school bus drivers and drivers nominated by private operators as school bus drivers may continue to perform this role, subject to completing an annual medical examination up to the retirement age of 70 years.

This criteria is applied to all drivers who provide services as part of the School transport scheme that is operated by Bus Éireann, on behalf of the Department of Education and skills. As this age limit has been examined previously and the retirement age extended to 70 years, there are no plans to extend this limit further at this point in time.

Special Educational Needs

505. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the autistic spectrum disorder units at primary and post-primary level being funded in County Dublin in 2019 and 2020; the number, name and location of those approved for 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16089/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The list of special classes in County Dublin for the years referred to by the Deputy, including special classes for children with autism, is available on the NCSE website at <https://ncse.ie/>.

14 July 2020

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.

Budget 2020 provided for an additional 265 special class teachers in 2020, which will allow for the opening of additional classes where required.

The National Council for Special Education has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide; has well established structures in place for engaging with schools and parents; and seeks to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all children who have been identified as needing special class placements.

The NCSE is planning a further expansion of special class and school places national 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.

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. The legislation contains a procedure through which the capacity of schools in an area can be tested and through which ultimately a Ministerial direction can be made requiring a school to make additional special education provision available.

The legislation was used for the first time in 2019, in respect of the Dublin 15 area. Significant progress has been made in that area on foot of action taken under Section 37. A new Special School was established and six schools have agreed to open special classes thereby meeting the need for additional places in the area. 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 29 October 2019 following a report by the NCSE which identified children in South Dublin needing special education school places. Since then, the NCSE in consultation with the relevant education stakeholders, has been testing the capacity amongst schools in the South Dublin area.

On 21 April 2020 my Department 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.

The report identifies the schools who it is considered have potential to provide additional places. These schools were identified following an extensive engagement with schools and their patron bodies and parents in the area.

Having considered the report, the Minister accepted the opinion of the NCSE and statutory notices have been served on 39 schools in the area on 26 June last.

I understand that already some progress has been made and the NCSE is working with a number of schools to establish classes for this coming school year.

My Department, in conjunction with the NCSE, will continue to work through the next steps in this process.

State Examinations

506. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the statistical methods which will be used for the standardisation of results submitted by schools in the context of the calculation of grades within the leaving certificate; and the relevant mathematical equations. [14644/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): A system of Calculated Grades was put in place by my predecessor due to the inability to run the normal Leaving Certificate examinations. The purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

For the calculated grades system to be operated with integrity, an estimated percentage mark, based on credible, satisfactory evidence, can only be accepted from an appropriate source. This is necessary to ensure fairness to all students.

Detailed guidance for schools on calculated grades was published on 21 May. The document sets out information on the process that was to be undertaken for estimating marks for students to receive calculated grades, and was sent to all schools. The document, together with Frequently Asked Questions, are available on www.gov.ie/leavingcertificate. Additional guidance to schools on the avoidance of unconscious bias, interpreting evidence of achievement in the case of students with disabilities, and further guidance on bonus marks that would have applied for answering the written examinations through Irish issued to schools on 28 May.

Schools have since returned estimated percentage marks for students to the Departments Calculated Grades Executive Office.

Research makes clear that because teacher judgments are made in the context of each school, they need to be examined and adjusted at a national level to ensure comparability across different schools and that a common national standard is applied.

In the national standardisation phase school-sourced data will be combined with historical data. This standardisation process will be used to ensure that the calculated grades reflect standards that are properly aligned across schools and with a common national standard. The key principles of objectivity, equity and fairness will be further underpinned within the national standardisation process and the process has been designed to arrive at fair representations of student performance which does not favour any type of student or school. These data sets allow the production of good calculations of the distributions of marks to be expected for each school and nationally.

The relevant Department data sets that support the process include mark data at:

- National level for both Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate examinations for 2019

and previous years;

- School level for both Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate examinations for 2019 and previous years;

- Candidate level for both Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate examinations for 2019 and previous years;

- Candidate level for the Junior Certificate results of the 2020 Leaving Certificate cohort of candidates.

In advance of receiving the estimated percentage marks from schools the information about how the school has done in the past and the information about the strengths and weakness of the current group of students will all be assembled and will be used to predict the level of achievement that this particular group of students would have been expected to reach in that subject if those students had sat the Leaving Certificate examination in the normal way. This information is then combined with the estimates that the school has provided in order to generate the fairest possible result that can be calculated. Checks have to be made to ensure that the outcomes of the standardisation process are valid – this involves checking that the standardisation process has not been unfair to students.

An independent Steering Committee chaired by Dr Áine Lawlor, former Director of the Teaching Council, is overseeing the quality and integrity of the outcomes of the calculated grades system. It is intended to publish further details about the standardisation process following the issue of calculated grades to candidates.

After the national standardisation process, the calculated marks will be converted into calculated grades, and these grades will be issued to candidates. The calculated grades will be expressed in the same manner as currently applies to Leaving Certificate grades - H1, H2, O1, O2, etc.

State Examinations

507. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of students who applied for calculated grades; and the number who have applied for same who will not receive a calculated grade for that subject. [14645/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): A system of Calculated Grades was put in place by my predecessor due to the inability to run the normal Leaving Certificate examinations. The purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

Calculated Grades are based on an estimated percentage mark provided by schools. The estimated percentage mark is based on a teacher's professional judgement of what the candidate would be expected to achieve had they sat the Leaving Certificate examination

Students were required to register for calculated grades using the student portal which was available between 26th and 28th May. 57,972 candidates for the established Leaving Certificate programme registered on the portal and 2,855 students for the Leaving Certificate Applied programme.

The system is also being used to provide Year 1 LCA students (5th years) with calculated

grades for elements of the programme that they have completed in 2020. There are also 3644 such students entered.

The Calculated Grades Executive Office (CGEO) in the Department of Education has developed a comprehensive guide to calculated grades for out of school learners – the students who are studying entirely outside of school – and has contacted each student individually on 25 June to invite them to apply for calculated grades. The closing date for applications was last Thursday 2 July 2020 and applications are now being processed.

In cases where a student who is attending school, but who is studying one or more subjects outside of school, school principals were asked to make every effort to provide an estimated mark for that subject(s) provided there was sufficient, credible evidence available from an appropriate source. If the principal was unable to provide an estimated mark for any student they were asked to notify my Department. As part of its commitment to ensure that a calculated grade is provided to as many students as possible, the CGEO are currently undertaking a review of these reports with the schools involved to ensure that the correct procedures were followed.

While the aim of the Department is to provide a calculated grade for as many students as possible, despite every effort being made by schools and by the Department of Education, there will be a small number of cases where there is no credible evidence to support a calculated grade in a particular subject. To attempt to give a calculated grade in such cases would be unfair to all other candidates.

Such students will have an opportunity to sit the Leaving Certificate examinations when it is safe to do so.

No decisions have been issued by the Calculated Grades Office in respect of any of these students – either those studying independently, or those attending school but studying a subject (or subjects) outside school, to date.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

508. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the approach she plans to take to ensure that those in fifth year in the 2019-20 academic year are not disadvantaged by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic; and the adjustments that will be made in terms of the exam or courses and various other matters to compensate for same. [14646/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Following the school closure in March 2020, my Department published a range of guidance to assist schools and teachers in ensuring continuity of teaching and learning for students as well as supporting their wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This guidance aimed, inter alia, to ensure regular engagement of students in lessons, tasks and learning experiences across the range of curriculum subjects, provision of regular assignments and regular, practical, supportive and customised feedback on work submitted.

Schools adopted various ways to engage with their students in accordance with the technology and broadband resources available in school and at home, including by post, e-mails, communication apps, the school website, use of other digital communicative platforms, including live meetings. Schools were asked to be conscious of pupils who may not have access to online facilities and to adapt approaches so that these pupils continued to have the opportunity to participate in learning.

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The aim of these distance learning approaches, the guidance which issued to all schools and the regular engagement with students, was to ensure that students stayed connected with and progressed their learning. These actions will, therefore, have helped to minimise the impact of school closure. The reopening in time for the start of the new school year remains a top priority for my department.

In the context of planning for a return to school which is underway, the Department recently published a report to Government on Planning for reopening schools in line with the Roadmap for reopening. This report is available on my Department's website.

My Department, in consultation with relevant agencies, including the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), identified the following key priorities in supporting students in re-engaging with the curriculum in the new school year:

1. The wellbeing and socialisation of students
2. Assessing where students are in terms of their learning
3. Identifying the additional supports that particular learners may require
4. Exploring options for remote provision that will compliment in-school provision and address curriculum gaps experienced during school closure

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. My Department will continue to collaborate with the NCCA to develop guidance to schools to assist them in their planning for the next school year so as to ensure that curricular priorities are delivered and that teaching and learning is optimal in these circumstances, guided at all times by public health advice.

Students going into sixth year in post primary schools are a group that will receive a particular focus in the context of their preparations for the Leaving Certificate examinations in 2021. The State Examinations Commission (SEC) has statutory responsibility for the operation of the state examinations. My Department will engage with the SEC and the NCCA in the development of fair and robust assessment arrangements in relation to both the Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations for 2021.

My Department is acutely aware of the challenges faced by students at this difficult time, and how the current circumstances will continue to present challenges into the future. The welfare of students is, and will continue to be, front and centre in all decision making.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

509. Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire asked the Minister for Education and Skills the steps that will be taken to ensure ongoing education of students or teachers and teaching staff in the event of a person being immunocompromised and unable to attend school buildings in the normal way or in the instance of students, teachers or teacher staff displaying symptoms. [14647/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): On Wednesday 1 July 2020, I welcomed the publication of interim public health advice for the safe re-opening of schools in late August/ September. This interim health advice sets out the key public health requirements that will be required for a safe full reopening of schools and the measures that will be required to achieve this.

Receipt of the public health advice will underpin ongoing engagements with education partners and stakeholders in terms of planning and providing guidance for schools in relation to logistical, curricular arrangements and wellbeing, including the issues raised by the Deputy. This guidance will also outline the important measures required for infection prevention and control to ensure the return to school is safe for children and staff.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

510. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if steps are being taken to ensure standardisation and the establishment of best practice models for remote learning in the event of a further outbreak of Covid-19; and the additional investment in technology and online access in such an event. [14648/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Schools are best placed to determine how best to support the learning needs of their students based on their own context and circumstances. Central to this is the role of the teacher, as mediator and facilitator, in ensuring the continuity of engagement regardless of the mechanism chosen for that purpose.

During the school closures teachers were provided with guidance to ensure that they continued to work and engage with their pupils to ensure the continuity of schooling in the home environment.

This guidance was developed in consultation with all relevant stakeholders – including teachers, parents and learners. There is ongoing consultation with the management bodies and unions from both sectors on all matters relating to Covid 19 including the reopening of schools for the coming school year. The current pandemic continues to have implications for all and this is likely to impact the operation of schools in the coming school year. Certain situations may give rise to a need for schools to develop alternative approaches to teaching and learning including the adoption of models of remote and blended learning in order to meet the needs of learners. My Department continues to work with all relevant stakeholders to inform further supports and guidance to schools to cater for this evolving situation. This will include relevant resources for schools on best practice models for remote/blended learning approaches and how to be plan contingency and appropriate responses in the event of future closure.

In relation to investment in technology and 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. Some €160m of funding has issued to date. This includes €50m issued earlier this year in the form of a grant payment to all eligible schools and included €10m top-up funding issued to schools to enable them to specifically support any of their students experiencing difficulty in engaging with remote learning. In the context of the current public health crisis the funding can be focussed on assisting schools to address ICT needs including the purchases of digital devices, software, essential learning platforms and other ICT solutions as determined by the needs of the individual school.

Covid-19 Pandemic

511. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when the roadmap for a full return to education will be published (details supplied). [14649/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): On 12 June 2020 my Depart-

ment published the report to Government “Planning for reopening schools in line with the Roadmap for reopening society and business”. The report set out the clear ambition to develop a sustainable plan to fully reopen schools at the start of the next school year.

Receipt of the public health advice on the 1st July will further underpin this important work and ongoing engagements with education partners and stakeholders in terms of planning and providing guidance for schools to ensure the return to school is safe for children and staff. It is envisaged that this guidance will be finalised by the end of July in order to allow time for schools to implement the necessary arrangements locally.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

512. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if all additional hygiene costs including refuse costs incurred by schools will be carried by her Department and not incurred by the school or passed on to parents. [14650/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I recognise that enhanced cleaning will be required to support schools to prevent COVID-19 infections. My Department is engaging with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on the requirement to provide funding to support enhanced cleaning needs and we will provide further details of the support available once the arrangements are finalised.

My Department has also arranged for a drawdown framework to be established to enable schools purchase hand-sanitisers for use in the school and classroom. The procurement process for this framework has already commenced and it is intended these materials will be available in early August.

My Department will continue to engage closely with education partners and other key stakeholders on the plan for re-opening of schools for the 2020/21 school year with the aim of reducing the burden on schools at a local level by providing central guidance and supports to the greatest extent possible.

International Students

513. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reduction in the number of international students expected to attend third level institutions here in the 2020-21 academic year than in the previous academic year. [14651/20]

514. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated number of students who will defer a course in third level institutions in the 2020-21 academic year compared to the previous academic year. [14652/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 513 and 514 together.

Given the unprecedented circumstances brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic is difficult to make predictions about patterns of enrolment in third-level institutions in the 2020/2021 academic year, such as deferrals or international enrolments.

For international students, 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. For domestic students factors such as

the expected student experience, and the availability of other opportunities for employment or training will have an impact.

In addition, while a student may request to defer their place in a third-level institution, there is no guarantee this request will be granted. If the deferral is not granted the student will have to choose between taking up the offered place in the current academic year, or re-applying through the CAO the following year. The choice of whether to grant a deferral rests with the admissions office of the institution in question.

Ultimately international student enrolments, and student deferrals will depend on the choices of the individuals in question and are not within the power of my Department to predict but my Department is engaging with relevant stakeholders in this regard.

Student Universal Support Ireland

515. Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she is considering expanding SUSI to take into consideration the fact that it has not been increased in recent years and in view of the uncertain employment situations of many workers at this point. [14653/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The eligibility criteria for student grants are reviewed annually by the Department and approved by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

All proposals made in relation to higher education expenditure, including student grants for the 2021/22 academic year, will be considered in the context of Budget 2021.

I would like to re-assure the Deputy that I am conscious of the difficulties being experienced by students and their families as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and of the importance of the Student Grant Scheme and related supports, such as the Student Assistance Fund and the Fund for Students with Disabilities. These supports have a fundamental role in assisting families who are putting their children through further and higher education.

Accordingly, the following arrangements have been put in place:

For the 2020/21 academic year, student grant applications will be assessed based on gross income from all sources for the period 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2019.

If a student or party to their application experiences a change in circumstances that is not a temporary change and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, they can apply to have their application assessed under the change in circumstances provision of the relevant Student Grant Scheme. Following such a review, the applicant may fall within the thresholds to become eligible for grant assistance or be entitled to an increased rate of grant or the special rate of grant.

The 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).

My officials have been in contact with their counterparts in the Department of Social Protection, Community & Rural Development and the Islands. They have advised me that full-time

students who had part-time employment when the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced in March, can avail of this support payment.

The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) will now be extended from 9 June until Phase 5 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business (currently scheduled to begin on 10 August). I welcome this decision which further supports students who have lost their income due to the pandemic.

Although there will now be a two level payment structure to link the Pandemic Unemployment Payment level to prior earnings, no person on the lower rate of payment will receive less on PUP than they were previously paid by their employer.

As well as the above Higher Education Institutions have the autonomy to maximise the flexibility in the Student Assistance Fund to enable HEIs to support students during the COVID-19 situation.

Third Level Institutions

516. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if further consideration has been given to or the status of a financial package for the third-level institutions; and if so, if it will include increased SUSI, HEAR, DARE and Access funding to ensure expansion of access to third-level education. [14654/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I am conscious of the difficulties being experienced by students and their families as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and of the importance of the Student Grant Scheme and related supports, such as the Student Assistance Fund and the Fund for Students with Disabilities. These supports have a fundamental role in assisting families who are putting their children through further and higher education.

Accordingly, the following arrangements have been put in place:

For the 2020/21 academic year, student grant applications will be assessed based on gross income from all sources for the period 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2019.

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My officials have been in contact with their counterparts in the Department of Social Protection, Community & Rural Development and the Islands. They have advised me that full-time students who had part-time employment when the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced in March, can avail of this support payment.

The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) will now be extended from 9 June until

Phase 5 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business (currently scheduled to begin on 10 August). I welcome this decision which further supports students who have lost their income due to the pandemic.

Although there will now be a two level payment structure to link the Pandemic Unemployment Payment level to prior earnings, no person on the lower rate of payment will receive less on PUP than they were previously paid by their employer.

As well as the above Higher Education Institutions have the autonomy to maximise the flexibility in the Student Assistance Fund to enable HEIs to support students during the COVID-19 situation.

Mitigating the impact of Covid19 on Higher Education Providers and safeguarding that capacity against the backdrop of the broader economic crisis is a priority. By ensuring that core provision is maintained and in particular by assessing the level of financial vulnerability that may threaten the viability of any specific institution, the Department, the HEA and representative bodies are working together to respond to this crisis.

Accordingly, the HEA was requested by the Department to complete an assessment of the potential impact of Covid19 on individual institutions in consultation with key stakeholders. The HEA's assessment of the position for individual HEIs is largely informing, the Department's consideration of financial impact of Covid19 on Higher Education and the Tertiary Education system. The longer term financial impact and support required to assist the recovery of the Tertiary Education Sector 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.

In addition, as set out above a review is currently underway under the European Commission DG Reform's Structural Reform Support Programme regarding 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

517. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which adequate space will be ensured in the CAO process for the 2021-22 academic year, in view of the fact that there may be an increase in deferred applications and an increase in international places, to ensure that those studying the leaving certificate in 2020-21 will have adequate access. [14655/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): 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, including the number of places, are made by the HEIs which then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates. This will remain the case for the 2021/2022 academic year.

Given the unprecedented circumstances brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic is difficult to make predictions changes in enrolments in third-level institutions in the 2020/2021 academic year, such as increased deferrals or decreased international enrolments. Arrangements for the 2021/2022 academic year will be examined the context of such changes when their extent be-

comes clear.

Third Level Admissions

518. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills her views on whether there will be additional places available in third level places through the CAO process in 2020; and if so, the number. [14656/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I 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.

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, including the number of places, are made by the HEIs which then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates. This remains the case this year.

Covid-19 Pandemic

519. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the engagement that has taken place with schools on reopening in September 2020. [14664/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has been engaging on an ongoing basis with our Partners and stakeholders since schools were first closed in March. Initially this engagement involved supporting the continuation of learning and in more recent times focusing on the planning necessary for a full reopening of schools in late August/September.

On Wednesday 1 July 2020, I welcomed the publication of interim public health advice for the safe re-opening of schools. This interim health advice sets out the key public health requirements that will be required for a safe full reopening of schools and the measures that will be required to achieve this. This advice will underpin ongoing engagements with education partners and stakeholders in terms of planning and providing guidance for schools to ensure the return to school is safe for children and staff.

Schools Building Projects

520. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she will review the decision to locate new temporary Educate Together facilities and buildings on a site adjacent to a school (details supplied) that has been earmarked for a long-awaited extension to the school that had been agreed by her predecessor; if she will ensure the redevelopment of the school on the earmarked site and identify another location for the school, which is needed to bolster school places in the area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14670/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): A building project to provide a new 16 classroom school plus a 2 classroom Special Educational Needs Unit for the Gaelscoil

in question is included in my Department's school building programme. The new building will be provided on a site adjacent to its existing site in Rathcoole, Co. Dublin. This site is being acquired by my Department from South Dublin County Council.

The Educate Together National School referred to by the Deputy is to be located on a Department owned site at Coolamber Drive, Rathcoole, Co. Dublin. Access to this site will require the construction of a new road which is currently being planned by South Dublin County Council.

As the permanent site is not currently accessible and as my Department now has access to the land adjacent to the Gaelscoil, it was determined that the interim accommodation for the ETNS could be provided temporarily on that site.

My Department wrote to the Board of Management of the Gaelscoil earlier this year with regard to the proposed construction of a permanent school building for their school and outlined my Department's plans in this regard.

The school was informed of my Department's intention to commence the architectural planning process for the construction of its new school building. My Department also outlined that in tandem with this it would also initiate the architectural planning process for the construction of the new Educate Together NS. The letter outlined that the building projects for both schools would be advanced in parallel.

The letter further outlined the need for my Department to provide interim accommodation to facilitate the new start-up school accommodation for the ETNS and that this interim accommodation was intended to be temporarily placed on the additional site area being acquired for the Gaelscoil.

It outlined the process which was to take place including lodging a planning application for the interim accommodation for the ETNS and also advised that my Department plans to move this temporary accommodation for the new school to its Coolamber Drive site as soon as site access is secured and in order to facilitate the construction of the permanent building for the Gaelscoil.

My Department had also intended to arrange a meeting with the Gaelscoil to explain these matters in more detail but then the Covid 19 situation occurred and it was prevented from arranging this meeting to date. Now that the restrictions are being relaxed, my officials will be in contact shortly with the Gaelscoil to arrange that meeting.

The permanent school building projects for both schools were recently assigned to my Department's Design & Build delivery programme. This delivery programme uses a professional external Project Manager to progress the project through the relevant stages of architectural planning and construction. Architectural Planning has now commenced with site surveys under way.

Special Educational Needs

521. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the additional supports that are available to children who have a dual diagnosis of autism and verbal dyspraxia; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14672/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department's policy is to provide for the inclusive education of children with special educational needs, including those

with Autism and dyspraxia, in mainstream school settings, unless such a placement would not be in the best interests of the child concerned, or the children with whom they will be educated.

This policy ensures that the majority of children with special education needs attend mainstream classes with their peers.

Such placements facilitate access to individualised education programmes which may draw from a range of appropriate educational interventions, delivered by fully qualified professional teachers, with the support of Special Needs Assistants, Special Education Teachers and the appropriate school curriculum.

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 where lower pupil:teacher ratios apply and there are other supports available.

There is therefore not one preferred educational environment for children with SEN, rather there is a continuum of provision which takes into account the assessed educational needs of individual pupils.

As such, my Department's policy focuses on ensuring that all students can have access to an education appropriate to meeting their needs and abilities

My Department invests €1.9 Billion or almost 20% of its total educational budget annually on making additional provision for children with special educational needs.

This represents an increase of over 50% in total expenditure since 2011, at which point €1.247 Billion per annum was provided.

The range of supports and services this funding provides includes provision for:

- 13,500 additional Special Education Teachers in mainstream schools and
- 17,000 Special Needs Assistants by the end of this year.

Other resources which are provided to schools to support children with Special Educational Needs including Autism include the following:

- The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)
- Assistive technology.
- Continued Professional development for teachers.
- Access to the Special School transport scheme.
- Access to special equipment and furniture where required.
- Enhanced capitation grants.
- Adapted school buildings.
- Access to SEN summer programmes

State Examinations

522. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the process by

which a student (details supplied) can secure a predictive grade for the leaving certificate having studied at home without a teacher or tutor; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14676/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): A system of Calculated Grades was put in place by my predecessor due to the inability to run the normal Leaving Certificate examinations. The purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

For the calculated grades system to be operated with integrity, an estimated percentage mark, based on credible, satisfactory evidence, can only be accepted from an appropriate source. This is necessary to ensure fairness to all students.

The Calculated Grades Executive Office in the Department of Education has developed a comprehensive guide to calculated grades for out of school learners – the students who are studying entirely outside of school – and has contacted each student individually on 25 June to invite them to apply for calculated grades. The closing date for applications was Thursday 2 July 2020 and applications are now being processed.

In cases where a student who is attending school, but who is studying one or more subjects outside of school, school principals were asked to make every effort to provide an estimated mark for that subject(s) provided there was sufficient, credible evidence available from an appropriate source. If the principal was unable to provide an estimated mark for any student they were asked to notify the Calculated Grades Executive Office of my Department.

As part of its commitment to ensure that a calculated grade is provided to as many students as possible, the CGEO are currently undertaking a review of these reports with the schools involved to ensure that the correct procedures were followed.

Despite every effort being made by schools and by the Department of Education, to provide calculated grades to as many students as possible, there will be a small number of cases where there is no credible evidence to support a calculated grade in a particular subject. To attempt to give a calculated grade in such cases would be unfair to all other candidates.

Such students will have an opportunity to sit the Leaving Certificate examinations when it is safe to do so.

No decisions have been issued by the Calculated Grades Office in respect of any of these students - either those studying independently, or those attending school but studying a subject (or subjects) outside school, to date.

The Department of Education has continued to engage with third level stakeholders regarding the Calculated Grades process for students seeking to progress to Higher Education. This has resulted in an agreed common approach in relation to students who have not been able to obtain calculated grades in one or more subjects. Students who have applied for a calculated grade, with a view to satisfying matriculation/basic minimum entry requirements and for whom the Department has been unable to award a Calculated Grade in the subject(s), will be granted an exemption in the subject(s) solely for matriculation/basic minimum entry purposes. The CGEO will notify the CAO of any student who cannot be provided with calculated grades, and of the subjects involved, and the exemption from matriculation/basic minimum entry will be granted automatically by the CAO. The subject(s) for which exemption is granted will not attract points and the exemption cannot be used to satisfy additional programme requirements over and above the matriculation/basic minimum entry requirements.

Covid-19 Pandemic

523. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she will request that private schools provide a partial refund on the fees parents have paid as a result of schools closing during the year in the same manner that insurance companies have provided partial refunds; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14682/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The Board of Management of a School is charged with the direct governance of schools under the Education Act. The level and extent of schools fees charged or decisions regarding reimbursement of such fees is a matter for each school Board of Management to decide. My Department has no role in such matters.

Schools Building Projects

524. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the project planned for a school (details supplied). [14700/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I would like to inform the Deputy that the school in question was awarded funding under my Department's Summer Works Scheme. I am also pleased to inform the Deputy that approval has been given to the school authority to appoint a contractor to carry out the works in question following receipt of a tender report from the school. An increase in funding was allowed in that respect to reflect inflationary increases arising from the lapse in time since the original application was submitted.

As this is a devolved project it is a matter for the school authority to progress the works.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

525. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if there are plans to accommodate funding for science PhD students whose studies were delayed due to Covid-19 (details supplied); and if the funding will be extended to ensure they can complete their work. [14701/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): On 13 March 2020, the Irish Research Council, in partnership with the Health Research Board and Science Foundation Ireland, issued a joint funders statement to address issues being faced by grant awardees during the Covid-19 pandemic. This was followed by the establishment of a group comprising the main competitive research funders and performers and the HEA, which provides a strong forum for dialogue on a range of issues.

The Department understands that flexibility is being offered by the research funding bodies to researchers such as considering proposals to reallocate costs within project awards, the provision of extensions for those directly impacted in terms of access to laboratories at this time, the possibility to review work packages within individual awards etc. All parties are seeking to work through the current situation in a way that safeguards our Research, Development and Innovation system to the maximum extent possible and to address the specific concerns regarding researchers on contracts that are linked to research funding awards. It is considered that an approach which deals with issues on a case-by-case basis is the most appropriate at this time and one that ensures the specific circumstances that arise in particular cases can be addressed effectively. In relation to costed extensions, the Department understands that a number of research funders are working proactively with their grant holders in this regard.

Health and safety is the paramount driver and the return of researchers is being managed appropriately at a local level given the very specific needs of different types of research and the closeness to completion of some projects, for example, for doctoral students and industry contracts, with oversight from the Heads of Research to ensure consistency and fairness in the approaches being taken.

Special Educational Needs

526. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the way in which the grant scheme for parents of children included in the July provision to help with transport costs will operate; when the scheme will be available for applications; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14712/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): 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 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were 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 €219 million in 2019.

With regard to transport arrangements for the Summer Programme my Department will provide grant funding to support parents with the cost of transport arrangements for those children who are eligible for school transport and who have been approved to participate in the school based Summer Programme.

Schools are required to identify children who are on a School Transport service or who are in receipt of a grant. School Transport Section will be in contact with schools and families in regard to the arrangements for payment.

Grant payment is based on the distance that a family reside from their child's school of attendance. The calculation is based on four trips per day (home to school and school to home, morning and afternoon) multiplied by the number of days a child attends school for the programme. The current rate of grant is 39.12 cent per kilometre for the first 6,437 kilometres travelled and 21.22 per kilometre for each kilometre travelled thereafter.

Third Level Admissions

527. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if provisions are being made for applicants to the CAO for undergraduate medicine who completed the leaving certificate in previous years (details supplied); if there is a reduction in international students taking up course offers on undergraduate medicine programmes; if the places can be made available to EU applicants; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14715/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The system whereby calculated grades are generated includes a process of national standardisation in which marks and rankings submitted by schools will be examined and may be adjusted using statistical methods to ensure a common national standard is applied. Profiles of achievement at Leaving Certificate

level over the last three years will be used as part of this process and this will help ensure that the grades issued remain in line with national performance standards over time. Nonetheless, there will be fluctuations in CAO points this year, as there are every year, which will depend on the volume of applications, the number of applicants who meet the entry requirements and the grades received by applicants.

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, including the number of places offered, are made by the HEIs which then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates. Neither I nor my Department have any role in the operation of the CAO.

However a quota applies to the intake of EU students to medical education. Thereafter, the number of places allocated to non-EU students is a matter for the individual HEI concerned with the availability of clinical placements being an important factor in this regard.

Special Educational Needs

528. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a child (details supplied) will be allowed to engage in the summer scheme for children with disabilities. [14729/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Summer Provision is aimed at helping children with complex needs prepare for a return to education, particularly after the health restrictions that have been in place over recent months. As work continues on planning for the re-opening of schools, it is important that we take measures help the prevention of regression among these children in terms of their education and social interactions. Based on the information provided by the Deputy it appears that the child in question is eligible for summer provision.

The eligibility criteria for summer provision includes children in the following categories:

1. Pupils with a diagnosis of Autism
2. Pupils with severe and profound learning difficulties
3. Any child in a special school or a special class
4. Children transitioning into a special class from early years settings to primary school
5. Pupils in primary school mainstream classes who present with the following disabilities:
 - children with Down syndrome
 - children who are Deaf or most severe hard of hearing
 - children who are blind or have a most severe visual impairment
 - children who have a moderate general learning disability

- children with severe emotional behavioural difficulties

The Government has also approved the inclusion of children with Down Syndrome who are attending post primary school in the home-based strand of the Programme.

Children with the listed disabilities entering primary school next September are also eligible for the programme.

Covid-19 Pandemic

529. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a clear and consistent approach for the resumption of third level education will be ensured for students (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14730/20]

640. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if guidance will be provided to third level students and their families regarding when guidelines relating to the reopening of third level institutions will be forthcoming to allow students to plan accommodation and travel needs properly; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15626/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 529 and 640 together.

To assist with the development of plans for the re-opening and operation of higher education in an environment that may require social distancing and other public health requirements, the Department of Education and Skills is engaging with relevant stakeholders from the higher education sector. The importance of informing students of arrangements for the new semester in a timely manner forms part of these discussions and all those involved are committed to this. This work is ongoing, and it is hoped that a communication for the sector will be published in the coming weeks.

However Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are autonomous institutions and are entitled to regulate their own academic affairs and administrative processes. Decisions on how courses will operate will be made by each institution, and arrangements will vary between institutions and between courses. The HEIs will communicate the arrangements for the new academic year to students as soon as these arrangements have been finalised. Questions on arrangements for a specific institution or course should be directed to the institution in question.

Ministerial Responsibilities

530. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she has responsibility for SUSI. [14737/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The Student Grant Scheme is administered by Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), a business unit of City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETb).

The CDETb was appointed as the awarding authority for the student grant scheme in 2012. It is accountable to the Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science for matters pertaining to the student grant scheme.

Ministerial Responsibilities

531. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the person or body with responsibility for SUSI. [14738/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The Student Grant Scheme is administered by Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), a business unit of City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETb).

The CDETb was appointed as the awarding authority for the student grant scheme in 2012. It is accountable to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science for matters pertaining to the student grant scheme.

Ministerial Responsibilities

532. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she has responsibility for Science Foundation Ireland and the funding lines of same. [14739/20]

533. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the Minister with responsibility for Science Foundation Ireland. [14740/20]

534. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she has responsibility for the Irish Research Council. [14741/20]

535. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the Minister with responsibility for the Irish Research Council. [14742/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 535 to 535, inclusive, together.

Following the making of the relevant legislative orders both the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland will come under the remit of the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

In 2020 Science Foundation Ireland was allocated total funding of €211.56 million, comprising €12.65 million in current funding and €198.91 million in capital funding.

School Transport

536. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if refunds will be given for school transport which was paid in advance for the 2019-20 academic year; if school transport costs will be reduced for the forthcoming academic year in view of the fact that school transport was paid for but not used after 12 March 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14752/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): 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 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were 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 €219 million 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.

Given that the school transport services have not been available to children from 13 March, it was decided that at the end of the current school year a refund for that period of closure will be issued to parents. My Department has been engaging with Bus Éireann in developing a plan for facilitating these refunds and I can confirm that refunds will be issued directly to all entitled family account holders.

The refunds process has commenced and refunds to those families who paid by cheque issued during the week commencing 29 June. With regard to families who paid by card, Bus Éireann is emailing all families due to receive a refund to advise them of arrangements. Further details on the refunds process is available at <https://www.buseireann.ie/SchoolRefunds>.

School Transport

537. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of refunds for school transport. [14779/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): 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 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were 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 €219 million in 2019..

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14 July 2020

538. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den an Aire Oideachais agus Scileanna cén chaoi a mbíonn scoláire a tógadh sa Ghaeltacht cáilithe do cheann de na háiteanna a bhíonn coinnte do scoláire Gaeltachta sna cúrsaí céime d'ábhar oidí bunscoile de bharr gur cuireadh deireadh le Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge sa bhliain 2010; an bhfuil malairt teiste ann dóibh siúd atá ag cónaí sa Ghaeltacht ó shin; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [14788/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Is eol dom go bhfuil an Teachta ag tagairt don soláthar fadbhunaithe atá ann trínar féidir suas le 10% d'áiteanna ar chlár na Céime Baitsiléir Oideachais (B.Ed) bunscoile sna ceithre Institiúid Ardoideachais bunscoile atá maoinithe ag an stát a chur in áirithe d'iarrthóirí a bhfuil cónaí orthu sa Ghaeltacht ainmnithe go hoifigiúil agus arb í an Ghaeilge gnáththeanga an bhaile dóibh.

Faoi láthair, is iad na critéir roghnúcháin chun incháilitheacht iarrthóra don bhealach iontrála sin chun teagaisc a mheas ná go bhfuil seoladh baile an iarrthóra i gceantar Gaeltachta agus go raibh an teaghlach ag fáil deontais roimhe sin faoin Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge (SLG).

I gcásanna nach raibh teaghlach iarrthóra ag fáil deontais Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge roimhe sin ach a bhfuil cónaí air nó uirthi i gceantar Gaeltachta, tabharfar cuireadh don iarrthóir chun gallaimh a dhéanamh chun a fháil amach an í Gaeilge teanga an bhaile.

Is mian liom a chur in iúl don Teachta go bhfuil athbhreithniú á dhéanamh ag mo Roinn ar na critéir agus ar an bpróiseas roghnúcháin don bhealach iontrála áirithe sin chun teagaisc, lenar cuimsíodh comhairliúchán leis na páirtithe leasmhara ábhartha. Tuigim go bhfuil an t-athbhreithniú sin beagnach tugtha chun críche agus déanfar fógra a luaithé a bheidh an próiseas críochnaithe.

Is é príomhaidhm an Pholasaí don Oideachas Gaeltachta (2017-2022) soláthar múinteoirí nua-cháilithe a bhfuil an inniúlacht acu meánoideachas ardchaighdeáin trí Ghaeilge a sholáthar i scoileanna, go háirithe i suíomhanna scoile Gaeltachta.

Chun oibriú i dtreo chuspóir an Pholasaí a bhaint amach, d'fhonn soláthar múinteoirí a bhfuil an inniúlacht acu oideachas ardchaighdeáin Gaeilge a sholáthar i scoileanna, d'fhógair mo Roinn go seachadfaí dhá chlár nua oideachais trí mheán na Gaeilge do mhúinteoirí lena n-áirítear clár B.Ed. um Oiliúint Tosaigh Múinteoirí (teagasc bunscoile) agus Máistreacht ar Oideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta, a sheachadfaidh suas le 60 áit nua d'Oideachas Múinteoirí trí Ghaeilge gach bliain.

English Version

I am aware that the Deputy is referring to the long standing provision which exists whereby up to 10% of places on the primary Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) Degree programme in the four state funded primary Higher Education Institutions may be reserved for candidates who reside in the officially designated Gaeltacht and the normal language of whose home is Irish.

Currently, the selection criteria for assessing a candidates eligibility for this entry route to teaching is that the candidate's home address is in a Gaeltacht area and that the household was previously in receipt of a grant under the Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge (SLG).

In instances where a candidate's household were not previously in receipt of a Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge but reside in a Gaeltacht area, the candidate will be invited to interview to establish if the language of home is Irish.

I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has been reviewing the criteria and selection process for this particular entry route to teaching, which has included consultation with the relevant stakeholders. I understand that this review is near completion and an announcement

will be made as soon as the process is complete.

A key aim of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education (2017-2022) is to increase the supply of newly-qualified teachers with the competence to deliver high quality Irish-medium education in schools, particularly in Gaeltacht school settings.

To work towards achieving the Policy's objective of increasing the supply of teachers with the competence to deliver high quality Irish-medium education in schools, my Department announced the delivery of two new Irish-medium teacher education programmes including an Irish-medium B.Ed. Initial Teacher Education programme (primary teaching) and Masters on Irish-medium and Gaeltacht Education, which will deliver up to 60 new places for Teacher Education through Irish annually.

School Staff

539. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she will give consideration to the measures outlined in correspondence in the case of a school (details supplied). [14790/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I am very conscious of the staffing schedule and the need to prioritise teacher allocations in primary schools given their vital role in communities around the country. I am looking at how best to make further progress in reducing the primary teacher ratio in the context of the programme for Government implementation.

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 appeal from the school referred to by the Deputy was considered by the Primary Staffing Appeals Board and deemed ineligible as the appeal did not meet the criteria published in Circular 18/2020. The school has been notified of this decision. The Primary Staffing Appeals Board is independent of the Department and its decision is final.

School Enrolments

540. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills her views on a matter regarding a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14792/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): In relation to school admissions, it is the responsibility of the managerial authorities of all schools to implement an enrolment policy in accordance with the Education Act, 1998 and the Admission to School's Act 2018. My Department's main responsibility is to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all pupils seeking school places in the area.

Parents have the right to choose which school to apply to and where the school has places available the pupil should be admitted. However, in schools where there are more applicants

than places available, as in the case of Presentation Secondary School, Milltown, a selection process may be necessary. This selection process and the enrolment policy on which it is based must be non-discriminatory and must be applied fairly in respect of all applicants. However, this may result in some pupils not obtaining a place in the school of their first choice.

A Board of Management may find it necessary to prioritise enrolment of children from particular areas or on the basis of some other criterion, including giving priority to applicants who have attended a particular primary school, commonly known as a feeder school. The criteria to be applied by schools in such circumstances and the order of priority are a matter for the schools themselves.

The question of enrolment in individual schools, including the setting of catchment areas, is the responsibility of the managerial authorities on behalf of the school Patron and my Department does not seek to intervene in decisions made by schools in such matters.

Covid-19 Pandemic

541. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when schools and parents will be notified of classroom configurations under the guidelines announced for physical distancing on the return to school. [14794/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Receipt of the public health advice for the reopening of schools and educational facilities on 1 July will underpin the important work of ongoing engagements with education partners and stakeholders in terms of planning and providing guidance for schools to ensure the return to school is safe for children and staff.

This guidance when fully developed will include templates that can be used by schools as a guide to reconfigure classrooms in line with the physical distancing requirements published in the interim public health advice. It is envisaged that this guidance will be finalised by the end of July in order to allow time for schools to implement the necessary arrangements locally.

Ministerial Responsibilities

542. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she will provide a copy of the Departmental briefings received by her and each Minister of State in her Department upon taking up each individual role; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14801/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): In keeping with the established practice, a comprehensive briefing document was prepared in advance of my appointment by officials in the Department of Education and Skills which was then finalised following the Taoiseach's announcement that the previous Department of Education and Skills would have its responsibilities, together with certain responsibilities previously assigned to other Departments, assigned to two Ministers in the current Government.

The briefing document provided to me; and similar briefing provided to Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, at my Department, represents the first phase of briefing following our appointments and as briefings are continuing I do not propose to make the briefing document available at this time. The Deputy may wish to note that, again in accordance with established practice, the briefing document will be published on the Department's website in the coming weeks.

Summer Works Scheme

543. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a summer works scheme application will be granted due to the circumstances of a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14814/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to confirm to the Deputy that the school to which he refers applied for funding for the work in question under my Department's Emergency Works Scheme. As the scope of the works associated with this application were outside the terms of the scheme, this application was refused. I can also confirm that the mechanism for applying for funding for the full set of works of the nature described is my Department's Summer Works Scheme and as such it is open to the school authority to apply for these works under a future Summer Works Scheme.

It remains open to the school to reapply for funding under the Emergency Works Scheme with a reduced scope of works to address those issues which might prevent the school or part thereof from opening.

Third Level Institutions

544. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if additional mental health funding will be provided for mental health services for third level institutions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14843/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): All higher education institutions are required to put in place appropriate student services, which can fall under a number of headings, particularly 'Welfare and Guidance', which includes counselling services and health promotion. In Budget 2020 funding of €2 million was provided by the Government for student mental health and wellbeing initiatives in the higher education sector. This will enhance the capacity of institutions, by supplementing the funding that the institutions already invest in the provision of these services to students. Each higher education institution will benefit from the additional funding, and I understand that the HEA has advised the higher education institutions in this regard.

In addition, a National Framework on Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention was developed by a working group, which included representatives from the HEA, USI, National Office of Suicide Prevention, Psychological Counsellors in Higher Education in Ireland, the HSE as well as from my Department. It is expected that the Framework will be published in the coming weeks, thus providing an invaluable resource to the third-level institutions.

Covid-19 Pandemic

545. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the provision of education is considered an essential service. [14845/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I can assure that the Deputy that I am acutely aware of the essential role that education can play as a means of improving the lives of children and young people in Ireland. I have seen how the work of teachers and schools has the capacity to transform life outcomes for children and young people for the better.

The widespread recognition of the importance of education for our children and young

people was reflected in the fact that, while it was not possible on public health grounds related to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic to have children travelling to and from school and congregating in school settings earlier this year, my Department worked with stakeholders to protect the continuity of teaching and learning in the system. My Department produced a suite of guidance documents for school authorities, teachers and parents, giving guidance on how online teaching and learning could operate to ensure that children could continue to learn. The documents are available on my Department's website.

Since my appointment as Minister for Education, I have continued to work with my officials and with stakeholders in the sector to ensure that schools and other centres of learning will be able to open in the Autumn, in a way that is safe but that also ensures that the vital teaching and learning that goes on in our schools on a daily basis can continue in the interests of our learners.

Covid-19 Pandemic

546. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education and Skills her plans to conduct research to ascertain the impact school closures have had on children and their families. [14846/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Since schools closed in March 2020, a number of pieces of research on the experience of distance learning in schools have been carried out involving the Department's Inspectorate, the National Parents' Councils, school management and principals' organisations and research bodies such as the Economic Social and Research Institute (ESRI), Maynooth University and Trinity College Dublin. This research has included surveys of school principals and parents as well as engagement with students. The research indicates that the experience of distance learning varied widely for students and was strongly dependent on factors such as access to devices and adequate broadband coverage. Students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and students with special educational needs appear to have been most affected by the shift to distance learning. This replicates the experience in other countries worldwide where the closure of schools due to Covid-19 has greatly interrupted students' learning in general and particularly that of the most vulnerable students. A detailed analysis of the national and international research that has been published and other available data is underway within my Department and will inform guidance from the Department on the full re-opening of schools.

The key focus now is getting all schools to re-open from the beginning of September and to help students settle back into school and make progress in their learning with as much ease as possible. I am conscious of the need to avoid placing any additional burden on schools at this time, including additional work or disruption to learning that could arise from conducting further research surveys or testing in schools.

I am conscious, of course, of the need to monitor the successes that are achieved and challenges that will arise as schools resume working, so that policy, guidance and practical supports are adjusted as necessary. Circulars have issued to schools in late June, detailing how my Department's Inspectorate will be engaging with schools once they re-open: inspectors will be focussed on providing advisory and support sessions or visits for schools to assist in the resumption of schooling, and information arising from these engagements will be systematically analysed to provide feedback to my Department. This information and analyses will inform the provision of any further guidance and supports.

Covid-19 Pandemic

547. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if standardised testing will be mandatory for schools in September 2020 to ascertain the impact of school closures on educational attainment. [14847/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department advised schools of its decision to cancel Standardised Testing for primary schools for the 2019/2020 school year in April of this year. The decision was taken at the time when there was uncertainty as to whether the schools would reopen again in the 2019/2020 school year.

The priority of my Department at the time was to support the learning and wellbeing of all our learners and this has not changed. On return to school the focus for teachers and the whole school community will be on settling the children and returning to normality in the classroom without the added pressure of having to undertake standardised tests. It is not envisaged by my Department that standardised tests of reading and Mathematics will be administered on the return to school.

I would note that Standardised Tests are but only one of a number of assessment tools that can be used to inform teaching and learning in primary schools. Consideration by teachers of the different assessment forms they might take to assess their pupils' learning without placing any stress or pressure on the pupil to include teacher observation, questioning, tasks and pupil-teacher conferencing should be considered.

My Department will issue Return to School curriculum guidance in the coming weeks.

Special Educational Needs

548. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if children with additional needs will be subject to further school loss in September 2020 if social distancing is required of children. [14848/20]

549. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the measures which will be put in place to support children with complex needs and their families if a full return to school does not happen in September 2020. [14849/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 548 and 549 together.

On Wednesday 1 July 2020, I welcomed the publication of interim public health advice for the safe re-opening of schools in late August/ September. This interim health advice sets out the key public health requirements that will be required for a safe full reopening of schools and the measures that will be required to achieve this.

Receipt of public health advice will underpin ongoing engagements with education partners and stakeholders in terms of planning and providing guidance for schools in relation to logistical and curricular arrangements and wellbeing, including the issues raised by the Deputy. This guidance will also outline the important measures required for infection prevention and control to ensure a full return to school is safe for children and staff, including children with complex needs.

Schools Building Projects

550. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a school (details

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supplied) has been included in the school building programme for the 2020-21 period; if so, if it will be allowed to proceed to tender stage; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14851/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The major building project for the school referred to by the deputy is at an advanced stage of architectural planning, Stage 2b (Detailed Design). All statutory approvals have been secured.

This project is included in the Department's Construction Programme which is being delivered under the National Development Plan.

The Design Team has recently submitted the Stage 2(b) Report to the Department for review.

Upon completion of this review, the Department will revert to the school regarding the further progression of this major building project.

School Transport

551. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the extra funding which will be provided to school bus operators due to the extra costs that will exist in providing school services from September 2020. [14884/20]

624. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the funding put in place to compensate school transport providers for extra costs expected to be incurred on buses to meet public health requirements; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15396/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 551 and 624 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 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were 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.

With regard to the re-opening of schools for the 2020/21 academic year, my Department is currently engaging intensively with Bus Éireann, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the National Transport Authority on the logistical considerations that arise from public health advice in planning for the reopening of schools. The operation of school transport services in September 2020 will be informed by the outcome of this planning for re-opening schools.

School Curriculum

552. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills her plans to improve

sex education in secondary schools. [14894/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The new Programme for Government sets out that this Government will develop inclusive and age appropriate curricula for Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) across primary and post-primary schools, including an inclusive programme on LG-BTI+ relationships.

This work will draw on development work being undertaken by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), following publication of the council's report on RSE in primary and post-primary schools in December 2019. Key recommendations in that report included that (i) in the short term the NCCA would begin work on interim guidance to support the teaching of SPHE/RSE in schools and (ii) the NCCA would also begin work in 2020 on redeveloping the overall SPHE/RSE curriculum in schools, involving extensive public consultation.

School Funding

553. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills her plans for capital investment in secondary schools in the next three years. [14895/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Under Project Ireland 2040, my Department continues to make progress to increase the infrastructural capacity in the schools sector, in order to meet demographic and other demands.

As the Deputy will be aware, since April 2018, the Government announced plans for the establishment of 45 new schools over the next four years (2019 to 2022), including 17 new post-primary schools. Enrolments in post-primary are projected to continue rising for the next 4 years out to 2024, as the peak cohort that has just left primary moves through post-primary, with post-primary expected to fall steadily thereafter. The requirement for new schools will be kept under on-going review and in particular will have regard for the increased rollout of housing provision.

The Capital Programme details the school projects, including secondary schools, that are being progressed under Project Ireland 2040. I wish to advise the Deputy that the current status of large-scale projects being delivered under Project Ireland 2040, may be viewed on my Department's website, www.education.ie and this information is updated regularly.

The Capital Programme also provides for devolved funding for additional classrooms, if required, for schools where an immediate enrolment need, has been identified or where an additional teacher has been appointed. Details of schools listed on this Programme can be found on my Department's website www.education.ie and this information is also updated regularly.

Third Level Institutions

554. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if all the recommendations of the Oireachtas Standing Committee of Public Accounts in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to date in 2020 regarding the funding and administration of third level institutions have been implemented; and the status of each action as per the various reports, in tabular form. [14896/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The information requested is not readily available in the format requested by the Deputy. However, the information is being

collated by officials in my Department and will be made available to the Deputy very shortly.

School Accommodation

555. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if her Department is still considering the temporary accommodation of a school at a site (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14930/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is still considering the temporary accommodation of a school at the site to which the Deputy refers and will revert to the patron body shortly.

Schools Site Acquisitions

556. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if her Department will be making its final decision on the temporary site for a school (details supplied); and when she will be informing the school of same. [14931/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is still considering all options relating to the temporary site for the school to which the Deputy refers and will revert to the patron body shortly.

Special Educational Needs

557. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the contact made with a school (details supplied) to facilitate it with the appropriate information to allow it to provide the summer provision scheme to its students in 2020, either through teachers providing the service or parents funding tutors to provide the service within school grounds; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14942/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department published details of *Summer Provision 2020 – Reconnecting with Education* including a programme for children with complex special educational needs.

The programme is a significant expansion on the July Provision programme of previous years with the eligibility criteria widened to include approximately 9,000 additional primary aged children with complex needs.

All special schools and primary schools with special classes are invited to provide the school based summer provision for their students. This programme will run for a minimum of two weeks and can extend up to four weeks where the schools, teachers and Special Needs Assistants are willing to participate.

Stepaside ETNS were one of the schools invited to take part in the School Summer Scheme, information on the scheme and how to register were included.

A reminder was sent to all eligible schools on the 3rd of July advising the deadline for registration was the 8th July 2020.

Home-based provision is available where a child's local school is not providing a programme or does not have the capacity to accommodate a child in a planned programme this year.

In this situation my Department will provide grant funding towards the engagement by Parents of a registered teacher / SNA to provide home based support for 10 hours a week for 4 weeks.

Similar to the July Provision programme of previous years grouping arrangements are permitted subject to Terms and Conditions.

Any group interested in providing group home based support should contact the Department by email -

@ HomeBasedSummerProgram@education.gov.ie or phone (090) 648 4187 (10am to 5pm Monday to Friday).

Full information on summer provision and its various strands, including guidance information for parents, is available at Gov.ie/summerprovision

Special Educational Needs

558. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if provision can be made for those who are eligible to attend a special class but do not wish to take part in the home-based summer provision programme such as in the case of a person (details supplied). [14943/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Summer Provision is aimed at helping children with complex needs prepare for a return to education, particularly after the health restrictions that have been in place over recent months. As work continues on planning for the re-opening of schools, it is important that we take measures help the prevention of regression among these children in terms of their education and social interactions. Based on the information provided by the Deputy it appears that the child in question is eligible for summer provision.

The eligibility criteria for summer provision includes children in the following categories:

1. Pupils with a diagnosis of Autism
2. Pupils with severe and profound learning difficulties
3. Any child in a special school or a special class
4. Children transitioning into a special class from early years settings to primary school
5. Pupils in primary school mainstream classes who present with the following disabilities:
 - children with Down syndrome
 - children who are Deaf or most severe hard of hearing
 - children who are blind or have a most severe visual impairment
 - children who have a moderate general learning disability
 - children with severe emotional behavioural difficulties

The Government has also approved the inclusion of children with Down Syndrome who are attending post primary school in the home-based strand of the Programme.

Children with the above disabilities entering primary school next September are also eligible for the programme.

Special Educational Needs

559. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Skills her plans to ensure the July provision is extended to all children in the categories mentioned in summer provision 2020 entering primary and post-primary education and not exclude those who are due to enter primary education in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14944/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Summer Provision is aimed at helping children with complex needs prepare for a return to education, particularly after the health restrictions that have been in place over recent months. As work continues on planning for the re-opening of schools, it is important that we take measures help the prevention of regression among these children in terms of their education and social interactions.

The eligibility criteria for summer provision includes children in the following categories:

1. Pupils with a diagnosis of Autism
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 - children with Down syndrome
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 - children who are blind or have a most severe visual impairment
 - children who have a moderate general learning disability
 - children with severe emotional behavioural difficulties

The Government has also approved the inclusion of children with Down Syndrome who are attending post primary school in the home-based strand of the Programme.

Children with the listed disabilities entering primary school next September are also eligible for the programme.

Schools Building Projects

560. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of work on creating a new school (details supplied). [14950/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The patronage divesting process arises from the recommendations of the 2012 report of the Advisory Group to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, following which the Department undertook surveys of parental preferences in 43 areas of stable population in 2012 and 2013 to establish the level of parental demand for a wider choice in the patronage of primary schools within these

areas. Analysis of the parental preferences expressed in each area surveyed indicated that there was sufficient parental demand to support changes in school patronage, including in the area to which the Deputy refers.

For such areas, the patronage divesting process was intended to be based on using school buildings which had closed or where a school building may be freed up as a result of an amalgamation of two or more schools. In some areas, including in the case of the area referred to by the Deputy, in responding to demand for diversity where existing patrons were unable make school properties available, my Department also included an examination of properties held in public ownership.

To date, it has not been possible to secure a school property to facilitate a new school being established in the area. However, the Department is continuing its efforts in relation to identifying a suitable solution under the patronage divesting process.

In addition, the requirement for new schools to meet emerging demographic demand is kept under on-going review and in particular will have regard to the impact of the increased roll out of housing provision as outlined in Project Ireland 2040.

Schools Building Projects

561. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the rebuild of a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14963/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The Deputy will be aware that the building project for the school in question is included in my Department's Construction Programme to be delivered as part of the National Development Plan.

The Design Team have been appointed and are currently working on Stage 1 of Architectural Planning (Site Suitability, Site Report, and Initial Sketch). When the Design Team have completed this preparatory Stage, they will present the options to the Department and the school, for review and comment.

School Staff

562. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she will consider a revision to the honours degree allowance for primary school teachers in order that teachers who have qualified with pass degrees will also receive this allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14965/20]

563. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she will revise the honours degree allowance for primary school teachers in order that teachers who attained a pass level in their primary degrees will also qualify for a salary top-up; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14966/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 562 and 563 together.

My Department has implemented the outcome of the public service-wide review of allowances and premium payments which was completed in September 2012 by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. There are no plans at this time to further review eligibility criteria for qualification allowances.

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School Funding

564. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she will review the response to Parliamentary Question No. 136 of 30 June 2020; if the very low level of funding required will be provided in view of the fact that the initiative will alleviate overcrowding and health and safety issues while the school awaits the construction of a new school and physical education hall; and if a positive response will be expedited. [15027/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Due to the need to prioritise the available capital funding for essential classroom accommodation, I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department is not in a position to provide the funding sought by the school in question for an outdoor sporting facility.

Special Educational Needs Staff

565. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the rate of pay for qualified SNAs providing summer provision; the rate of pay for qualified teachers doing the same work; the method and timing of payments in both instances; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15028/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Teachers and SNAs employed by their school to provide school based summer provision are paid a rate based on their normal salary.

Home-based provision is available where a child's local school is not providing a programme or does not have the capacity to accommodate a child in a planned programme this year.

In this situation the Department will provide grant funding towards the engagement by Parents of a registered teacher / SNA to provide home based support for 10 hours a week for 4 weeks.

The role of Tutors and Special Needs Assistants engaged by Parents under the home based summer programme are separate and distinct and broadly reflect the role of teachers and SNAs in schools. See <https://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/summerprovision/home-based-guidance-summer-programme.pdf>.

The grant level/pay rates for Tutors and SNAs participating in the home based summer programme are based on the pay rates for substitute Teachers and SNAs and are set out in the information note and FAQ document available at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/summerprovision/home-based-information-faqs-for-parents.pdf>

The payment method and timing are the same as applied to the July Provision programme of previous years with payments issuing at the end of October.

School Admissions

566. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a school place will be provided for a person (details supplied); the contact details for the school liaison officers who may assist with the issues; her plans to assist all those on the waiting lists for school places; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15031/20]

568. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of

children on the waiting lists for schools (details supplied) in County Kilkenny; if her Department or local officials are engaged with the families and the schools to resolve the waiting lists; if a place at one of the schools will be provided for a child; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15033/20]

602. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a school place will be provided for a child (details supplied); and if there are sufficient places in schools in Kilkenny city to meet the demand. [15303/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 566, 568 and 602 together.

I understand that the pupil referred to by the Deputy who applied for a school place at Coláiste Pobail Osrai was offered a place and that the offer was declined.

I wish to advise the Deputy that in relation to schools admission, parents can choose which school to apply to and where the school has places available, the pupil should be admitted. However, in schools where there are more applicants than places available, a selection process may be necessary. This selection process and the enrolment policy on which it is based must be non-discriminatory and must be applied fairly in respect of all applicants. However, this may result in some pupils not obtaining a place in the school of their first choice. These details are held at individual school level. The Deputy will note however that the selection process procedures and enrolment policy are the responsibility of the individual school authorities.

Under section 15 (2) (d) of the Education Act 1998, each school is legally obliged to disclose its enrolment policy and to ensure that as regards that policy that principles of equality and the right of parents to send their children to a school of the parent's choice are respected.

Under Section 29 of the Education Act, 1998 where a board of management make a decision to refuse enrolment, a parent/guardian can appeal that decision to the Secretary General of my Department. Where the appeal involves an Education and Training Board (ETB) school, the appeal must be made to the local ETB in the first instance. Further information on the Section 29 Appeals process is available on my Department's website at www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/Appeal-against-Permanent-Exclusion-Suspension-or-Refusal-to-Enrol/.

In addition, the Educational Welfare Service (EWS) of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) is the legal body which can assist parents who are experiencing difficulty in securing a school placement for their child. The EWS can be contacted at 01-7718815.

I also wish to advise the Deputy that Kilkenny Carlow Education Training Board has confirmed that places for first year applicants are available in Coláiste Pobail Osrai and Kilkenny City Vocational School (KCVS). It is open to the parents /guardians of the children concerned to make direct contact with the schools should they wish to submit an enrolment application to these schools. The schools may be contacted through the following email addresses: Cathy.Mcsorley@KCVS.ie and for Coláiste Pobail Osrai, priomhoide@osrai.ie.

School Staff

567. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a complaint made to her Department by a person (details supplied) has been investigated; if the claim that they were due eight months' pay has been upheld; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15032/20]

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Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has been in contact with the Deputy seeking clarification on the issue raised. On receipt of this clarification my Department will contact the Deputy again.

Question No. 568 answered with Question No. 566.

Schools Site Acquisitions

569. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she will review an ongoing issue regarding a school (details supplied); and the duration of the lease agreed on the temporary site. [15034/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has secured the agreement of the owners of the temporary site to accommodate the school referred to by the Deputy. The legal arrangements associated with the lease are currently being finalised by the Chief State Solicitor's Office and the owner's legal representative and is expected to be completed shortly.

My Department's Planning and Building Unit is working closely with school authorities and Patrons, including the patron of the school in question, to ensure that contingency arrangements are in place, where necessary, if a school building project is not completed in time for the start of a new school year as a result of delays caused by Covid-19.

My Department is continuing to prioritise this matter and will be liaising with the school's Patron in this regard.

Ministerial Responsibilities

570. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for special education and inclusion; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15044/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy will be aware, Ministers of State are appointed by the Government, on nomination of the Taoiseach.

In accordance with the Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 1977, the Government may delegate, by way of an Order, to a Minister of State any of the powers and duties of the relevant Minister of the Government under any particular Act or any particular statutory power or duty.

Ms Josepha Madigan TD has been appointed Minister of State in my Department with special responsibility for Special Education and Inclusion.

The relevant delegation order required on foot of this appointment is currently being prepared.

Ministerial Responsibilities

571. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for skills and further education; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15056/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy will be aware, arrangements for the establishment of my Department are currently being progressed, including in respect of the transfer of statutory and administrative functions, and delegation of responsibilities will be considered in that overall context in due course.

Special Educational Needs

572. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason there is such a delay with payments for the July provision (details supplied); if there is an option available to be paid earlier; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15087/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department published details of Summer Provision 2020 – Reconnecting with Education including a programme for children with complex special educational needs.

The programme is a significant expansion on the July Provision programme of previous years with the eligibility criteria widened to include approximately 9,000 additional primary aged children with complex needs.

The common pay date for the Summer Provision programme (formerly the July Provision Programme) was introduced in 2009 as part of my Department's continued effort to improve service to parents of children with special educational needs. This year's payment will issue on 29 October 2020 for those engaged in the programme at Primary level and for those at Post-Primary level payment will be made on 5 November 2020.

The benefit of the common pay date is that those engaged in the delivery of the programme know the exact date on which they will receive payment from my Department and they will receive payment on the same date irrespective of whether they are included in a school-based or home-based programme.

Special Educational Needs

573. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she will sanction an additional ASD build for a school (details supplied). [15091/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I am pleased to advise the Deputy that my Department has recently sanctioned additional capital funding, to the school referred to, for the provision of an additional special class. This funding will allow the school to deliver a 2-class Special Educational Needs Base. The school authority has been informed of this decision.

Covid-19 Pandemic

574. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a roadmap will be provided regarding the reopening of all schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15092/20]

575. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the system her Department is applying for secondary schools regarding social distancing (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15093/20]

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Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 574 and 575 together.

On Wednesday 1 July 2020, I welcomed the publication of interim public health advice for the safe re-opening of schools in late August/ September. This interim health advice sets out the key public health requirements that will be required for a safe full reopening of schools and the measures that will be required to achieve this.

Receipt of public health advice will underpin ongoing engagements with education partners and stakeholders in terms of planning and providing guidance for schools in relation to logistical and curricular arrangements and wellbeing. The advice also sets out the requirements for physical distancing measures in a school setting and how this should be implemented. The advice also contains important measures required for infection prevention and control to ensure a full return to school is safe for children and staff.

My Department's ongoing work with education partners and other key stakeholders on guidance for re-opening schools is aimed at reducing the burden on schools at a local level by providing central guidance and supports to the greatest extent possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic

576. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if her Department will examine the possibility of using additional space available locally to ensure all children can return to school in September 2020 (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15094/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): There has been a lot of engagement between my Department and stakeholders in relation to re-opening in September and this engagement is on-going. My Department's number one priority, and the wider school sector is to reopen our schools as fully, normally and safely as possible at the start of the new school year. The Department and stakeholders are collectively focused on working through the detail on what the return to school will look like for all schools. The public health guidance is clear that we must maximise the space within the classroom to facilitate the pupils in the classroom and maximise the space within the existing school building in the first instance.

The range of school settings presents both opportunities and challenges. Flexibility and agility in how we respond is key. My Department is working through with school managers, leaders and staff on how best they can be supported to not only open schools but to ensure they remain open.

School Transport

577. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding the operation of school transport; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15095/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): 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 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were 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.

With regard to the re-opening of schools for the 2020/21 academic year, my Department is currently engaging intensively with Bus Éireann, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the National Transport Authority on the logistical considerations that arise from public health advice in planning for the reopening of schools. The operation of school transport services in September 2020 will be informed by the outcome of this planning for re-opening schools.

Schools Building Projects

578. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the construction of a school (details supplied) in Dublin 14; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15112/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The school referred to by the Deputy has 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 is currently in the Architectural Planning phase with site surveys completed. A pre-planning meeting that had been scheduled for 13th March 2020 was cancelled due to Covid-19.

When planning is secured, the project will proceed to tender and construction.

Pending the delivery of the permanent accommodation the Patron Body has been advised that the Department will be providing interim start-up accommodation on the campus of Notre Dame school for the school to open in September 2020.

Schools Building Projects

579. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status on the construction of a school (details supplied) in Dublin 14; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15113/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The school referred to by the Deputy has 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 is currently in early Architectural Planning. The next milestone in the progression of the project will be the preparation of the planning application. In advance of the submission of the planning application, the school will be invited to review the plans. Once all statutory approvals have been secured, the project will proceed to tender and construction stages.

Schools Building Projects

580. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status on the construction of a school (details supplied) in Dublin 18; and if she will make a statement on the

matter. [15114/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Planning permission for the school building project referred to by the Deputy was granted by Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council on the 13th June 2019 subject to 18 no. conditions. Two of these conditions relating to the provision of a public greenway were subsequently the subject of a first party appeal by my Department to An Bord Pleanála. The decision of An Bord Pleanála overturning these two conditions was received on the 4th February 2020. The ABP decision has facilitated the progression to the next stage ie tender and construction. The current position is that tender documents are being prepared and when these are finalised in the coming months the project will then be in a position to go to tender with a bundle of projects.

Construction is underway for the installation of temporary accommodation on the permanent school site for September 2020.

Erasmus+ Programme

581. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of Irish students who participated in the Erasmus+ programme in each of the years 2015 to 2019, inclusive, and to date in 2020; the countries that the students studied in; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15117/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Higher Education Erasmus Programme Mobilites:

There were a total of 18,258 students (see following tables) from Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) on Erasmus mobility between 2015/16 and 2019/20 academic years to KA103 Programme Countries and KA107 Partner Countries. Of this figure, 3936 students from Irish HEIs went on an Erasmus mobility in 2019/20, an increase of 23.34% since 2015. The top destination countries for Irish students participating in Erasmus are France, Spain, Germany and the UK. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, complete data for the 2020 academic year is not yet available. My Department provides funding for up to 4400 higher education student mobilities per year.

Vocational Education and Training (VET) and School Erasmus Programme Mobilities:

There were an overall total of 9,026 outgoing students on Erasmus mobilites in the field of Vocational Education and Training together with Schools between 2015 and 2020.

The combined figures presented for VET and schools include completed and approved mobility projects shown per country for years up to 2018 and projects for 2018-2020 are still ongoing. For the years 2019 to 2020 the figures for schools are presented by country. However, due to a change in group countries from 2019 onwards, the VET figures for years 2019 and 2020 are categorised into country groups 1,2 and 3.

The 2020 figures for school mobilities are for Irish led projects which are unconfirmed as the European Commission's Central Clearing process remains to be finalised. The 2020 figures for foreign-led projects with Irish partners will not be available until August 2020.

Due to COVID-19, the European Commission is also supportive of virtual mobilities for the coming academic year. Irish HEIs are examining how best to manage mobilities for the 20/21 year as many partners across the EU seek to defer physical movement of students for the

immediate future.

[Erasmus Vet Schools]

[Erasmus Student]

Erasmus+ Programme

582. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of students who participated in the Erasmus+ programme in each of the years 2015 to 2019, inclusive, and to date in 2020 here; the countries that the students came from; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15118/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Higher Education Institutions Erasmus Mobilities:

There were a total of 39,837 international students (see following table) to Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) on Erasmus mobility between 2015/16 and 2019/20 academic years from KA103 Programme Countries and KA107 Partner Countries. Of this figure 7456 international Erasmus students carried out mobility in Ireland in 2019/20, representing a 12% decrease on the previous year. The top sending countries to Ireland are France, Spain, Germany, Italy and the UK. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, complete data for the 2020 academic year is not yet available, however an increase to the confirmed mobilities is expected.

In relation to incoming international student mobilities in the fields of school exchange partnerships and VET mobility projects, due to the nature of the EU reporting format this information is unavailable.

[Erasmus Programme]

Youth Services

583. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she will consider providing mediation services from her Department to help resolve a dispute (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15134/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Kerry ETB made a decision to deliver the Youthreach programme directly from 1 January 2019 and this transition has now taken place. While the Department had a role in relation to issues such as ETB staffing and pension implications and lease arrangements, it is a matter for Kerry ETB to engage on any cost liability to KDYS arising out of the process.

As a public body, Kerry ETB would be expected to follow the arrangements set out in DPER circular 17/2007 in relation to any potential mediation between the two organisations and any settlement of financial matters. The guidelines set out in the circular do not envisage a role for third parties beyond the mediator appointed to undertake the process.

Special Educational Needs

584. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the three dyslexic schools in Dublin will not be closing. [15135/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): There are no plans to close the schools referred to by the Deputy.

In September 2018, the NCSE was requested to develop policy advice on the educational provision that should be in place for students educated in special schools and classes and to make recommendations on the provision required to enable them achieve better outcomes.

It was agreed that the report would be completed and submitted to the Minister in 2020.

The NCSE was also requested to provide a progress report which was submitted on 5 November 2019.

The progress report provides an overview on the evolution of special education policy and provision in Ireland together with some preliminary analysis of emerging themes from a review of research literature and consultations with parents, teacher unions and education representative bodies, students, advocacy groups; school visits and relevant Government Departments and bodies. The Progress Report does not draw any definitive conclusions and the preliminary findings are tentative.

The NCSE is also examining implications following ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2018. Article 24(2) of this convention obliges states, inter alia, to ensure that children can access an inclusive, quality and free education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live.

The NCSE is currently engaged in a public consultation with parents, students, people with disabilities, educators and other educational partners and stakeholders. The consultation focuses on how best to move forward in the education of students currently being educated in special schools and classes. Special reading schools for pupils with dyslexia are included in this process.

Following this public consultation and further deliberations by NCSE, the policy advice will be finalised and submitted to the Minister by December 2020.

It is important to note that at this stage, the NCSE has not made any recommendations regarding the future of any special school.

Student Accommodation

585. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she will consider a waiver for student accommodation for those beginning third level in September 2020 in view of the fact that some colleges may be delayed in resuming on campus in order to assist parents and students with accommodation costs for September; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15145/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): 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 licence terms including cost, duration, refund and cancellation policies should be set out in the licence agreement signed at the beginning of the academic year.

While I would hope that accommodation providers would show flexibility to students in the current times, 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.

Schools Building Projects

586. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she will urgently review and reform tendering criteria for new school building projects in view of the fact the current criteria effectively lock out many localised but capable building contractors as turnover requirements for previous years are set unrealistically high; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15156/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): For small works using the Short Form of Contract, PWCF6, (under €1m) the average annual turnover over the previous three years must be not less than 1.5 times the sum tendered for the project. These projects would be tendered under an Open Procedure where the contractor can decide in advance whether they can meet the minimum standards specified in the Declaration of Suitability for Contractors for Small Works (Open Procedure Only).

As projects under €1m in value would have relatively short durations and a contractor of modest size could complete two or more of these in a year, average annual turnover of 1.5 times the tendered sum is not considered a high threshold.

For projects with an estimated cost over €1m in value, turnover levels are calculated in accordance with the Department's website guidance note.

The Guidance provides that for School building projects with an estimated cost over €1m turnover levels should be in the range 100% to 150% of the annualised turnover of the estimated capital value of the project. The actual percentage applied, within this range, should relate to the complexity of the project and should be based on the table below. In selecting the appropriate percentage within the sub-ranges below it is recommended that consideration should be given to the degree of complexity.

This guidance note is in accordance with central guidance on turnover from the Office of Government Procurement and relates the turnover requirement to the complexity of the project. My Department does not consider that a review or change of turnover levels is required.

	Project type	Multiplier
1	New build primary school projects on a green field sites with relatively clear access and limited complication with regard to site levels, site services, traffic management, etc.	100% to 115%
2	Primary school projects comprising extensions to existing accommodation and/or alterations / refurbishment to existing accommodation in a live school environment; Post-primary school projects comprising complete new build on green field sites or extensions to existing accommodation and/or alterations / refurbishment to existing accommodation in a live school environment.	115% to 135%
3	Primary or post-primary school projects on brown field sites comprising extensions to existing accommodation and/or alterations / refurbishment to existing accommodation in a live school environment and incorporating protected structures; Primary or post-primary school projects, new builds or extensions, on restricted urban sites.	135% to 150%

Third Level Institutions

587. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when funding committed to third level institutions for counselling services in 2020 will be allocated to ensure students have swift access to mental health supports particularly in the aftermath of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15181/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): All higher education institutions are required to put in place appropriate student services, which can fall under a number of headings, particularly ‘Welfare and Guidance’, which includes counselling services and health promotion. In Budget 2020 funding of €2 million was provided by the Government for student mental health and wellbeing initiatives in the higher education sector. This will enhance the capacity of institutions, by supplementing the funding that the institutions already invest in the provision of these services to students. Each higher education institution will benefit from the additional funding, and I understand that the HEA has advised the higher education institutions in this regard.

In addition, a National Framework on Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention was developed by a working group, which included representatives from the HEA, USI, National Office of Suicide Prevention, Psychological Counsellors in Higher Education in Ireland, the HSE as well as from my Department. It is expected that the Framework will be published in the coming weeks, thus providing an invaluable resource to the third-level institutions.

Third Level Admissions

588. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the steps she will take to improve access to higher education for members of the Traveller community. [15184/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Equity of access to higher education is a national priority for the Department and indeed, the Government. The third National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015-2021) (NAP) sets out the Department's current strategy to address underrepresentation in higher education by groups identified in the plan. The NAP identifies Irish Travellers as one of the target groups that are currently being under-represented in higher education. A progress review of NAP published in 2018 which extended the lifetime of the current plan to 2021, showed that while increases are evident in participation in Irish Travellers, there remains a significant challenge in achieving the target in respect of the Traveller target group. Even though the realisation of targets is proving difficult, evidence has shown that the number of Irish Travellers accessing higher education has increased from 35 (2012/2013) to 61 (2017/2018); a 74% increase since the commencement of this NAP.

Various initiatives under the strands of The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) funding aimed at increasing Traveller participation will assist in the realisation of the target and enhance understanding of the barriers that exist in respect of access to higher education by Traveller students. All PATH initiatives will support increased participation by Travellers however there are some dedicated entirely to this target group. This includes Marino Institute of Education TOBAR project (PATH1): Travellers Accessing Initial Teacher Education. This project focuses on targeting increased Traveller participation in Initial Teacher Education at primary level through engagement with Traveller community groups and targeted post primary schools, the provision of direct entry places and continuous support for Travellers who have been identified as aspiring to become a primary school teacher. There are two strands, B.Ed. Route and a direct entry (PME) and Continuous support. 7 Traveller students registered on the Tobar programme as on 30 September 2019. Traveller Awareness Training has been rolled out in some PME courses. Eight School workshops and specific meetings with 2—25

students and families.

Under PATH 2, 10 Irish Travellers have received 1916 Bursaries in the 2017/2018 academic year and a further 13 Travellers received a 1916 Bursary in 2018/19. 2019/2020 figures are not confirmed at this stage however indications are that this figure has further increased.

PATH 3 supports the development of regional clusters of HEIs to build capacity to support a regional approach to Access policy and initiatives. A number of specific Traveller projects are being supported – including the Travellers in Education project led by the South Cluster of HEIs which is promoting a whole-school approach to addressing Traveller participation needs.

The PATH fund was confirmed as a permanent fund in 2020 and has a current investment envelope of €30.9 million over the period 2016 to 2022, across the three strands.

While it is hoped that the numerous initiatives under the strands of The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) funding aimed at increasing Traveller participation will assist in the realisation of the target and enhance understanding of the barriers that exist in respect of access to higher education by Traveller students, it was considered that a specific action plan would bring a particular focus of attention on the on-going issue of underrepresentation of Travellers in HE.

The Action Plan for Traveller Participation in Higher Education 2019-2021 was published in November 2019. The overall objective of the Plan is to advance Traveller participation in higher education within the context of approaches on retention and transition of Travellers across the education spectrum. The Department is working closely with the HEA, Traveller Groups and other implementation partners to ensure roll-out of the Actions.

The Department is currently engaged in ongoing consultation with Traveller representative groups since the commencement of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department took part in a Forum on Traveller Transfers into Tertiary Education organised by Pavee Point and the National Travellers Women Forum on 27th May, 2020 and a subsequent round table discussion with access offices in Higher Education Institutions which considered the Forum Report on Monday, 29 June 2020.

Special Educational Needs Staff

589. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if guidance will be provided for special needs assistants in circumstances in which school staff are required to adhere to the 1 m to 2 m social distancing rule but this is not feasible while providing personal care to students with special needs; if guidance will be provided on the way in which the spread of Covid-19 can be prevented in circumstances in which a special needs assistant provides personal care to more than one student; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15196/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): On Wednesday 1 July 2020, I welcomed the publication of interim public health advice for the safe re-opening of schools in late August/ September. This interim health advice sets out the key public health requirements that will be required for a safe full reopening of schools and the measures that will be required to achieve this.

Receipt of public health advice will underpin ongoing engagements with education partners and stakeholders in terms of planning and providing guidance for schools in relation to logistical, curricular and wellbeing arrangements. The advice also sets out the requirements for physical distancing measures in a school setting and how this should be implemented. The advice

also contains important measures required for infection prevention and control to ensure a full return to school is safe for children and staff.

My Department's ongoing work with education partners and other key stakeholders on guidance for re-opening schools is aimed at reducing the burden on schools at a local level by providing central guidance and supports to the greatest extent possible by the end of July in order to allow time for schools to implement the necessary arrangements locally.

Schools Building Projects

590. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the new school building for a school (details supplied); if the site for the new school has been secured; if not, the stage this is at; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15198/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department is committed to providing a permanent accommodation solution for the school referred to.

In this regard, a suitable site has been identified to accommodate a permanent school building for the school. My Department continues to work closely with officials from Monaghan County Council under the Memorandum of Understanding in relation to the acquisition of the site.

As the site acquisition process is complex, it is not possible to give a definitive timeframe for the completion of the acquisition. Once this acquisition process is complete, the project for the provision of a new permanent building will be progressed into the architectural planning process without delay.

Schools Refurbishment

591. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when approval will be issued for works sanctioned for a school (details supplied) in County Mayo. [15208/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I am pleased to inform the Deputy, with respect to the project at the school to which he refers, that approval was given to the school authority last week to appoint a contractor to carry out these works. As this is a devolved project it is a matter for the school authority to progress them.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland

592. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills her views on the fact that an organisation (details supplied) provides chainsaw and arboricultural qualifications to a much higher standard than that which is available here at present yet are not recognised here; her further views on the UK-based qualifications recognised here that fall under the jurisdiction of UK courts and may not align to the European qualifications framework after Brexit; and her views on the speedy approval and recognition of the qualifications here in line with the co-operation agreement between Quality and Qualifications Ireland and the Education Bureau of Hong Kong. [15212/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Quality and Qualifications

Ireland (QQI) is the statutory body with responsibility for developing, promoting and maintaining the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

In line with the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) currently recognises the qualifications of Irish awarding bodies including Universities, Institutes of Technology, Technological Universities, QQI and the State Examination Commission. Following the enactment of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019, QQI's powers in this regard will be expanded to broaden the number and types of qualifications that can be included in the NFQ. This amending legislation, when commenced, will facilitate the inclusion of the qualifications of other awarding bodies including international, professional and UK awarding bodies. When commenced, such awarding body may choose to apply to QQI to have their qualifications, such as those in question, included in the Framework.

Currently, NARIC Ireland, hosted by QQI, provides recognition advice on foreign academic qualifications. This service provides comparability statements for a substantial number of qualifications from a wide range of countries aimed at assisting understanding of these qualifications in the context of the Irish education and training system. In addition to assisting the qualification holder, these statements can also help employers, funding agencies and education and training institutions to determine if an applicant holds the academic qualifications for a particular job, funding or course. These statements are available to download free of charge from its website at <http://www.naric.ie>.

The cooperation agreement between QQI and the Education Bureau of Hong Kong has facilitated an international level-to-level comparison exercise between the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF) and the NFQ which has utilised European Qualification Framework as a reference guide. This work is aimed at enhancing the transparency of qualifications systems in Hong Kong and Ireland by showing how both frameworks relate to each other at system levels. While this supports the portability of qualifications between the jurisdictions and would facilitate the recognition process, it does not align nor recognise individual qualifications in their own right.

While the UK is departing the EU, it has recently completed a referencing of its Qualifications Frameworks to the European Qualifications Framework. QQI collaborates closely with its UK counterparts on both bi-lateral and international initiatives that promote the transparency, recognition and mobility of qualifications between both jurisdictions and this work will continue post-Brexit. The qualifications authorities in the UK and Ireland have agreed the correspondence between qualifications frameworks in operation across the jurisdictions. This has resulted in a joint publication, *Qualifications can cross Boundaries*, which indicates the level of a UK qualification within the Irish NFQ.

Residential Institutions

593. Deputy Neasa Hourigan asked the Minister for Education and Skills her plans to present an action plan to execute the judgment in a case (details supplied); her further plans to ensure a formal scheme of redress to survivors of day school abuse; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15215/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Ireland submits bi-annual Action Plans to the relevant Committee of Ministers which is responsible for supervising the implementation of the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights. To date 11 Action Plans have submitted and a further one will be submitted later this year.

14 July 2020

As you are aware, the ex gratia scheme was established on foot of the specific circumstances arising from and in response to the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) relating to Louise O’Keeffe.

The Department undertook a review of the scheme in response to a determination by the Independent Assessor, Mr Justice Iarfhlaith O’Neill that one of the criteria for eligibility is incompatible with the ECtHR judgement. The Independent Assessor’s decision can be accessed in full at the Department’s website.

The review of the ex-gratia scheme has yet to be concluded and no decisions are being made as to the eligibility or otherwise of individuals.

I am sure the Deputy will understand the complexity and sensitivity of the issues involved that require very careful deliberation before proposals can be finalised and brought to Government.

School Staff

594. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the employment service of a person (details supplied) will be included as pensionable service; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15248/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to advise the Deputy that officials from the Pension Unit of my Department have contacted the person to whom he refers. In the absence of verification of service from this person’s employer, the management authority of the school, his request cannot be considered by the Department. In order for the Department of Education and Skills to determine if the period of employment can be made pensionable, in the first instance, it is a matter for the management authority of the employing school to verify this period of service. I wish to confirm that upon receipt of this verification, the person’s case will be reviewed and consideration given to whether or not this period of employment can be made pensionable.

Child Abuse

595. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when a new redress scheme for victims of sexual abuse in primary schools will be established; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15257/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The Ex Gratia Scheme established in the wake of the ECtHR was set up to deal with a specific cohort – people who had discontinued proceedings in the domestic courts in the wake of a number of High Court judgments and the Supreme Court judgment in the LOK case.

The review is ongoing. The Department of Education is committed to reviewing the ex gratia scheme, in conjunction with the Office of the Attorney General.

The issues involved are highly sensitive and complex and require very careful deliberation before proposals can be finalised and brought to Government. It is important to have a more complete awareness of the extent of the problem, the number of people who could potentially be involved the legal implications of any course of action, and an accurate estimate of likely costs before introducing any modifications to the scheme.

The Department has been criticised for not taking due account of these matters when establishing the residential institutional redress scheme. For example, the original estimates for the Residential Institutions were based on estimates drawn from known cases of litigations. The estimated figure of some 2,000 case ended up with in excess of 16,000 cases.

It is expected the review will be concluded in the coming months.

School Accommodation

596. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she has received recent correspondence regarding additional accommodation required for a school (details supplied); and the status of the matter. [15261/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I am pleased to inform the Deputy that funding was approved under my Department’s Additional Accommodation Scheme 2019 to enable the school in question to build one mainstream classroom, one WC for assisted users, five SET rooms and one Principal’s office.

I can confirm that the project has been devolved for delivery to the School Authority and is currently at design stage. My Department recently agreed the professional fees for this project and it is now a matter for the Board of Management to advance it.

Teacher Training

597. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated cost of restoring grants for student teachers’ attendance at mandatory Gaeltacht courses. [15267/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The Teaching Council is responsible for setting the standards for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes through the review and accreditation of all ITE programmes.

The Gaeltacht placement is a mandatory component of primary initial teacher education programmes, in accordance with the Teaching Council’s Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers of Initial Teacher Education.

The duration of the placement is a four week period broken into two separate blocks of two weeks.

The restoration of the Gaeltacht grant for students in State-funded primary initial teacher education (ITE) programmes with effect from the academic year 2020/21 was announced in Budget 2020. The estimated full year annual cost of restoring the grant is €1.8 million.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

598. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of additional teachers required to reduce average size class at primary level from 24.3 pupils to 23.4. [15268/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Budget 2020 has provided for a budget of more than €11 billion for the Department of Education and Skills in 2020. This is

the highest ever allocation to the sector and an increase of nearly €2 billion since 2016.

Teacher numbers at primary level have increased by almost 3,500 when comparing the 2015/16 school year with the current school year and this has led to a steady improvement in the pupil teacher ratio and average class size statistics during this period.

The latest figures in relation to pupil teacher ratio show an improved ratio of teachers to students from 16:1 to 15.2:1 at primary level when comparing the 2015/16 school year to the 2018/19 school year. Average class sizes at primary level improved from 24.9 to 24.3 in the same period.

The annual staffing schedule determines the allocation of teachers to schools. For the current school year, it operates on a general average of 26 pupils to every 1 teacher (26:1) which is historically the lowest ever allocation ratio at primary level.

Approximately 300 teaching posts would be required for each 1 point adjustment to the primary staffing schedule.

Schools Building Projects

599. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the construction of a permanent school building for a new secondary school (details supplied); the stage the plans are at; when it is anticipated that the project will be fully completed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15282/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The provision of permanent accommodation for the new post primary school to serve Greystones and Kilcoole requires the acquisition of a site by my Department.

I can confirm a potential site option has been identified and discussions are ongoing with the landowner with a view to acquiring this site. It is difficult to indicate a timeframe for any site acquisition as each process is unique and in some instances complex issues can arise which can cause delays.

My Department is committed to delivering a site for the new post primary school for the Greystones and Kilcoole area of County Wicklow and work is ongoing to achieve this as soon as possible. Once there is sufficient certainty in respect of a site the project to deliver the permanent accommodation can advance into the architectural planning stage and onwards to tender and construction stages.

Special Educational Needs

600. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if there is provision for an autism spectrum disorder, ASD, unit in a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15283/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): 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.

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 specialised provision and where sanctioned, a range of supports, including capital funding, is made available to the school. My Department works closely with the NCSE in this regard.

The NCSE, through the local Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO), is available to offer further advice and assistance to both schools and parents.

The school referred to by the Deputy is being established in temporary accommodation in September 2020. My Department is in the process of acquiring a site to construct a permanent building for the school. A Special Education Needs Base will be included in the permanent building when constructed.

English Language Training Organisations

601. Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor asked the Minister for Education and Skills if supports will be provided for ACELS, QQI and MEI accredited English language schools that were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic in March to reopen in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15297/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I am aware of the challenges that are being encountered in the English language education sector and the substantial impact that the Covid-19 outbreak has had on its students, teachers and providers.

As part of the response to the pandemic, my Department established a specific Working Group for this sector. This group is comprised of representatives of relevant Government Departments and representatives of both students and English language education providers.

As part of this process, the representative bodies for English language education providers have engaged with the Working Group surrounding their proposals for supports to aid the recovery of this sector. In this forum, the providers have been advised of the measures introduced by Government, as part of the wider Covid-19 response, to support businesses at this time. These measures include the temporary wages subsidy scheme to facilitate employers to keep employees on the payroll throughout the Covid-19 pandemic in order to retain this link for when business increases after the crisis. This scheme is administered by the Revenue Commissioners and is available to providers in the English language education sector. Additionally for those staff in this sector who have lost their jobs because of the pandemic, they are eligible to apply for the Government's Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

Further to the above, the provider representatives have been advised of the eligibility of businesses in this sector to apply, where appropriate, for further business supports made available by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation via Enterprise Ireland and through its network of Local Enterprise Offices. A full list of these supports and related information is available for providers here: <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID->

19-supports/.

Engagement with provider representatives will continue as this sector moves towards its full re-opening and continues on a path to recovery.

Question No. 602 answered with Question No. 566.

School Transport

603. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if school transport will be provided for a person (details supplied). [15306/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department.

In the 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were 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.

Under the terms of the scheme, children are eligible for school transport if they satisfy the distance criteria (4.8km at post-primary) and are attending their nearest school as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language. Distance eligibility is determined by Bus Éireann by measuring the shortest traversable route from the child's home to the relevant school.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who complete the application and payment process on time are accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation.

Bus Éireann has advised that the pupil referred to by the Deputy is not attending their nearest school/Post Primary Education Centre and is therefore not eligible for school transport under the terms of the scheme.

Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis only and may be facilitated where spare seats are available after eligible children have been accommodated. Where the number of ineligible children exceeds the number of spare seats available Bus Éireann will allocate tickets for the spare seats using an agreed selection process.

Protected Disclosures

604. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of protected disclosures from whistleblowers submitted to her Department in respect of institutes of technology; if each of the protected disclosures has been deemed as such by her Department; the number settled; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15309/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has received

6 protected disclosures in relation to institutes of technology. The details requested by the Deputy are contained in the following table.

Year	Institute of Technology	Outcome
2016	Waterford IoT	Ongoing
2017	Dundalk IoT (anonymous)	Concluded
2017	Cork IoT	Concluded
2017	Letterkenny IoT	Concluded
2018	Carlow IoT	Concluded
2019	Carlow IoT	Concluded

School Transport

605. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a school bus place will be provided for a child (details supplied). [15310/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department.

In the 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were 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.

Under the terms of the scheme, children are eligible for school transport if they satisfy the distance criteria (4.8km at post-primary) and are attending their nearest school as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language. Distance eligibility is determined by Bus Éireann by measuring the shortest traversable route from the child's home to the relevant school.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who complete the application and payment process on time are accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation.

Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis only and may be facilitated where spare seats are available after eligible children have been accommodated.

Bus Éireann has advised that the pupil referred to by the Deputy is not attending their nearest school/Post Primary Education Centre and is therefore not eligible for school transport under the terms of the scheme.

School Admissions

606. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a school placement will be provided for a child (details supplied); and the reason her Department holds the view that existing schools can cope with the number of children in Kilkenny city when the evidence indicates there is a long waiting list for each school. [15311/20]

607. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a school place will be provided in schools for a child (details supplied); the action her Department is taking to resolve the waiting lists in Kilkenny city for those wishing to attend secondary schools in the city; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15312/20]

608. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a school place will be provided for a child (details supplied); and the number of students in Kilkenny city and county. [15313/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 606 to 608, inclusive, together.

I wish to advise the Deputy that in relation to schools admission, parents can choose which school to apply to and where the school has places available, the pupil should be admitted. However, in schools where there are more applicants than places available, a selection process may be necessary. This selection process and the enrolment policy on which it is based must be non-discriminatory and must be applied fairly in respect of all applicants. However, this may result in some pupils not obtaining a place in the school of their first choice. The Deputy will note however that the selection process procedures and enrolment policy are the responsibility of the individual school authorities.

Under section 15 (2) (d) of the Education Act 1998, each school is legally obliged to disclose its enrolment policy and to ensure that as regards that policy that principles of equality and the right of parents to send their children to a school of the parent's choice are respected.

Under Section 29 of the Education Act, 1998 where a board of management make a decision to refuse enrolment, a parent/guardian can appeal that decision to the Secretary General of my Department. Where the appeal involves an Education and Training Board (ETB) school, the appeal must be made to the local ETB in the first instance. Further information on the Section 29 Appeals process is available on my Department's website at www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/Appeal-against-Permanent-Exclusion-Suspension-or-Refusal-to-Enrol/

In addition, the Educational Welfare Service (EWS) of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) is the legal body which can assist parents who are experiencing difficulty in securing a school placement for their child. The EWS can be contacted at 01-7718815.

I also wish to advise the Deputy that Kilkenny Carlow Education Training Board has confirmed that places for first year applicants are available in Coláiste Pobail Osrai and Kilkenny City Vocational School (KCVS). It is open to the parents /guardians of the children concerned to make direct contact with the schools should they wish to submit an enrolment application to these schools. The schools may be contacted through the following email addresses: Cathy.Mesorley@KCVS.ie and for Coláiste Pobail Osrai, priomhoide@osrai.ie.

I wish to confirm to the Deputy that in the school planning area for post primary schools in County Kilkenny, the total number of pupil enrolments for the 2019/2020 academic year was 8,320 of which 4,640 pupils were enrolled in post primary schools in Kilkenny City.

State Examinations

609. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if post-leaving certificate students prohibited from undertaking practical exams due to Covid-19 restrictions are to be graded under a predicted grade system; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15322/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): COVID 19 has presented challenges to all sectors of education, including PLC colleges, and the facilitating of practical examinations has been a particular challenge. The needs of learners are central to further education and training provision and Education and Training Boards (ETBs) provided alternative assessments across a wide range of courses. Where alternative assessment methods are not possible, and in line with health guidelines, ETBs are working with all stakeholders to enable learners to progress, including for the small numbers of learners with outstanding practical assessments who have made CAO applications. ETB institutions have communicated with these learners on the individual approaches being undertaken to enable them progress.

Covid-19 Pandemic

610. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when schools will be given official advice, not draft advice, on the reopening of schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15329/20]

613. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the plan to socially distance third to sixth class pupils will be in official advice; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15332/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 610 and 613 together.

On Wednesday 1 July 2020, I welcomed the publication of interim public health advice for the safe re-opening of schools in late August/September. This interim health advice sets out the key public health requirements that will be required for a safe full reopening of schools and the measures that will be required to achieve this.

Receipt of the public health advice will underpin ongoing engagements with education partners and stakeholders in terms of planning and providing guidance for schools in relation to logistical and curricular arrangements. The advice also sets out the requirements for physical distancing measures in a school setting and how this should be implemented. The advice also contains important measures required for infection prevention and control to ensure a full return to school is safe for children and staff.

My Department's ongoing work with education partners and other key stakeholders on guidance for re-opening schools is aimed at reducing the burden on schools at a local level by providing central guidance and supports to the greatest extent possible by the end of July in order to allow time for schools to implement the necessary arrangements locally.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

611. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if sanitisation equipment for cleaning schools will be supplied by her Department; if schools will have to source it themselves in view of the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15330/20]

614. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if additional classrooms, equipment and staff will be supplied to schools to accommodate social distancing; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15333/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions

Nos. 611 and 614 together.

Receipt of public health advice will underpin ongoing engagements with education partners and stakeholders in terms of planning and providing guidance for schools in relation to logistical and curricular arrangements and the issues raised by the Deputy.

My Department recognises that additional funding will be required for schools to support enhanced cleaning to prevent COVID-19 infections. My Department is engaging with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on the requirement to provide funding to schools for this purpose.

My Department has also arranged for a drawdown framework to be established to enable schools purchase hand-sanitisers for use in the school and classroom. The procurement process for this framework has already commenced and it is intended these materials will be available in early August.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

612. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if grant funding will be released to pay for additional school cleaning in view of the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15331/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I recognise that enhanced cleaning will be required to support schools to prevent COVID-19 infections. My Department is engaging with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on the requirement to provide funding to support enhanced cleaning needs and we will provide further details of the support available once the arrangements are finalised.

My Department have also arranged for a drawdown framework to be established to enable schools purchase hand-sanitisers for use in the school and classroom. The procurement process for this framework has already commenced and it is intended these materials will be available in early August.

This Department will continue to engage closely with education partners and other key stakeholders on the plan for re-opening of schools for the 2020/21 school year with the aim of reducing the burden on schools at a local level by providing central guidance and supports to the greatest extent possible.

Question No. 613 answered with Question No. 610.

Question No. 614 answered with Question No. 611.

Covid-19 Pandemic

615. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if isolation centres for sick children will be supplied by her Department; if so, the person or body that will be required to supervise them; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15334/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): On Wednesday 1 July 2020, I welcomed the publication of interim public health advice for the safe re-opening of schools in late August/ September. This interim health advice sets out the key public health requirements that will be required for a safe full reopening of schools and the measures that will be required

to achieve this.

Receipt of public health advice will underpin ongoing engagements with education partners and stakeholders in terms of planning and providing guidance for schools in relation to logistical and curricular arrangements and wellbeing. The guidance will also outline the requirements for managing suspected cases and appropriate isolation procedures in the event of a case arising.

My Department's ongoing work with education partners and other key stakeholders on guidance for re-opening schools is aimed at reducing the burden on schools at a local level by providing central guidance and supports to the greatest extent possible by the end of July in order to allow time for schools to implement the necessary arrangements locally.

Covid-19 Pandemic

616. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if substitute teachers will be supplied for teachers out sick with symptoms; if the entire bubble in which the teacher is involved will have to remain at home; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15335/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): On Wednesday 1 July 2020, I welcomed the publication of interim public health advice for the safe re-opening of schools in late August/September. This interim health advice sets out the key public health requirements that will be required for a safe full reopening of schools and the measures that will be required to achieve this.

Receipt of public health advice will underpin ongoing engagements with education partners and stakeholders in terms of planning and providing guidance for schools. This ongoing engagement also includes the position of substitution which will be outlined for schools once the arrangements are finalized.

Covid-19 Pandemic

617. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when guidelines regarding social distancing and so on will be published for bus companies that transport children from their homes to their schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15337/20]

623. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the discussions on public health measures, specifically the wearing of masks, that have taken place with school transport providers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15395/20]

625. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the person or body with responsibility for policing the wearing of face masks on school transport; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15397/20]

626. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if children on school transport will be required to wear face masks; the other public health measures to be implemented; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15398/20]

627. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when it will be possible for private school buses to operate at full capacity; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15399/20]

14 July 2020

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 617, 623 and 625 to 627, inclusive, 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 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were 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.

I recently welcomed the publication of interim public health advice from the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) in relation to the re-opening of schools. Engagement with stakeholders on the public health advice and planning process for both primary and post-primary schools will continue over the coming weeks.

With regard to the re-opening of schools for the 2020/21 academic year, my Department is currently engaging intensively with Bus Éireann, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the National Transport Authority on the logistical considerations that arise from public health advice in planning for the reopening of schools. The operation of school transport services in September 2020 will be informed by the outcome of this planning for re-opening schools.

Special Educational Needs

618. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of autism spectrum disorder, ASD, units within schools in County Tipperary; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15355/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): There are currently 68 special classes for children with autism in Co. Tipperary, of which 46 are primary and 22 are post primary.

A list of special classes for the current school year, including special classes for children with autism, is available on the NCSE website <http://www.ncse.ie/>.

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. Budget 2020 provided for an additional 265 special class teachers in 2020, which will allow for the opening of additional classes where required.

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.

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, be-

tween 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.

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>.

Youthreach Programme

619. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if statistics on the ethnic background of children accessing Youthreach programmes are available and if so, if they will be provided by ethnicity. [15359/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Statistics regarding the ethnic background of Youthreach Participants are recorded by Education and Training Boards on a further education and training database, the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS). The following figures are a unique count of learners enrolled in the Youthreach programme during 2019 as reported on PLSS. However it should be noted that the provision of this sensitive information by learners is on a voluntary basis and contingent on learners' provision of explicit and informed consent. As such, 240 out of the 2689 participants enrolled in Youthreach programmes in 2019 did not consent for data on their ethnicity to be recorded.

Ethnic background of Youthreach Learners enrolled in 2019.

	No.
White Irish	1,731
Irish Traveller	336
Roma	46
Any other white background	183
Black or Black Irish - African	56
Black or black Irish – Any other background	7
Asian or Asian Irish - Chinese	6
Asian or Asian Irish –Any other Asian Background	33
Other (Inc. Mixed background)	51
No Consent	240
Total	2689

School Admissions

620. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the steps being taken to ensure a person (details supplied) will get a place in a school that suits the person's needs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15375/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): 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.

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. The legislation contains a procedure through which the capacity of schools in an area can be tested and through which ultimately a Ministerial direction can be made requiring a school to make additional special education provision available.

The legislation was used for the first time in 2019, in respect of the Dublin 15 area. Significant progress has been made in that area on foot of action taken under Section 37. A new Special School was established and six schools have agreed to open special classes thereby meeting the need for additional places in the area. 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 29 October 2019 following a report by the NCSE which identified children in South Dublin needing special education school places. Since then, the NCSE in consultation with the relevant education stakeholders, has been testing the capacity amongst schools in the South Dublin area.

On 21 April 2020 my Department 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.

The report identifies the schools who it is considered have potential to provide additional places. These schools were identified following an extensive engagement with schools and their patron bodies and parents in the area.

Having considered the report, the Minister accepted the opinion of the NCSE and statutory notices have been served on 39 schools in the area on 26 June last.

I understand that already some progress has been made and the NCSE is working with a

number of schools to establish classes for this coming school year.

My Department, in conjunction with the NCSE will continue to work through the next steps in this process but in the interim the NCSE, through the local Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO), is available to offer further advice and assistance to parents.

Special Educational Needs

621. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason a child (details supplied) who fits the criteria of qualification for the July provision is being denied the provision due to the fact the child is transferring from preschool to primary school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15378/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Summer Provision is aimed at helping children with complex needs prepare for a return to education, particularly after the health restrictions that have been in place over recent months. As work continues on planning for the re-opening of schools, it is important that we take measures help the prevention of regression among these children in terms of their education and social interactions. Based on the information provided by the Deputy it appears that the child in question is eligible for summer provision.

The eligibility criteria for summer provision includes children in the following categories:

1. Pupils with a diagnosis of Autism
2. Pupils with severe and profound learning difficulties
3. Any child in a special school or a special class
4. Children transitioning into a special class from early years settings to primary school
5. Pupils in primary school mainstream classes who present with the following disabilities:
 - children with Down syndrome
 - children who are Deaf or most severe hard of hearing
 - children who are blind or have a most severe visual impairment
 - children who have a moderate general learning disability
 - children with severe emotional behavioural difficulties

The Government has also approved the inclusion of children with Down Syndrome who are attending post primary school in the home-based strand of the Programme.

Children entering primary school next September are also eligible for the programme.

State Examinations

622. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the timing for the sitting of the leaving certificate 2020; if it will be completed in time for college intake in September and October 2020; if not, if these students will be categorised as deferred entrants for the 2021 college intake; and if so, if they will have more than one choice available

to them on the CAO system. [15379/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): 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 pending the confirmation of the number of candidates that will sit each subject. 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.

Students who opt to sit the Leaving Certificate examinations at a later stage when it is safe to do so, and who receive an improved CAO offer on foot of these results, will receive a deferred college offer to start their course in the 2021/22 academic year. If a candidate who has started first year of a course becomes entitled to a higher CAO offer and chooses to accept same in the following academic year, attendance for the first year on the new course would remain eligible for free fees and SUSI funding as appropriate.

Question No. 623 answered with Question No. 617.

Question No. 624 answered with Question No. 551.

Questions Nos. 625 to 627, inclusive, answered with Question No. 617.

School Services Staff

628. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if approval has been received from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to enter into formal discussions within the Workplace Relations Commission on the equality pay issues relating to school secretaries; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15404/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I recognise the very important work done by these staff, and the other support staff in the running of our schools.

In Budget 2020 the number of secretaries and caretakers in certain schools was increased, allowing schools with enrolments of 500-625 to fill secretary vacancies provided they have fewer than 1.5 secretaries; schools with enrolments of 626-699 to fill vacancies provided they have fewer than two secretary posts filled, and schools of 700 or more to fill caretaker vacancies provided they have fewer than two caretakers. These measures will take effect from September 2020.

In Spring 2019 the moratorium was relaxed for those C&C and ETB schools with enrolments of 700 and more which allows them to employ additional school secretaries up to a maximum of two per school. There are 91 schools in the C&C and ETB Sector who meet this criteria, based on the information currently available to this Department. This was an initial step and took immediate effect.

Schemes were initiated in 1978 and 1979 for the employment of clerical officers and caretakers in schools. The schemes were withdrawn completely in 2008. These schemes have been superseded by the capitation grant schemes. The current grant scheme was agreed in the context of the Programme for Economic and Social Progress, published in 1991.

The majority of primary and voluntary secondary schools now receive assistance to provide for secretarial, caretaking and cleaning services under these grant schemes. It is a matter for each individual school to decide how best to apply the grant funding to suit its particular needs.

Where a school uses the grant funding for caretaking or secretarial purposes, any staff taken on to support those functions are employees of individual schools. Specific responsibility for terms of employment rests with the school.

On foot of a Chairman's Note to the Lansdowne Road Agreement, my Department engaged with the Unions representing school secretaries and caretakers, including through an independent arbitration process in 2015. The Arbitrator recommended a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 for staff and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period. This arbitration agreement covered the period up to 31 December 2019.

The arbitration agreement was designed to be of greatest benefit to lower-paid secretaries and caretakers. For example, a secretary or caretaker who was paid the then minimum wage of €8.65 per hour in 2015 prior to the arbitration has from 1 January 2019, been paid €13 per hour which is a 50% increase in that individual's hourly pay.

The increases recommended by the Arbitrator are binding and must be applied by all schools who employ staff to whom the Arbitrator's recommendation applies.

A survey of Secretaries and Caretakers undertaken in 2019 identified some schools that are non-compliant with the provisions of the 2015 Arbitration Agreement, and my Department has contacted these schools to remind them of their obligations under the agreement, as implemented through various circulars. The links below will bring you to the most recent circulars in respect of the pay increases under the 2015 Arbitration Agreement.

https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0076_2018.pdf

https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0077_2018.pdf

Officials from my Department attended a meeting of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills on the 9th of April 2019 to discuss the status of non-teaching staff.

In May last year officials from my Department had discussions with FÓRSA trade union representatives as part of a planned meeting. FÓRSA took the opportunity to formally table a pay claim.

This was tabled as a follow-on claim from the pay agreement for this cohort of staff which lasted until December 2019. The Department issued surveys on the 10th of July 2019 to establish the full current cost of the trade union's claim. This is standard practice.

Officials from the Department met with FÓRSA representatives in September 2019. Management Bodies representing the employers of schools impacted by the action were also in attendance at the meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to further explore the details of the pay claim as presented by FÓRSA and the nature of the industrial action.

On 30 September 2019 FÓRSA requested the Department to agree to use the services of the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) to resolve the dispute. As is normal practice the Department agreed to use the industrial relations machinery of the state in an effort to resolve this matter.

In order to address the various issues within the claim and to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution, the Department and Management Bodies are in discussions with FÓRSA under the auspices of the WRC. These talks are subject to the normal procedures including confidentiality. The talks began in the WRC in October.

Following industrial action, which commenced on the 10th January 2020, both parties have

agreed to return to talks at the WRC. FÓRSA agreed to the WRC request to suspend their ongoing work-to-rule to allow the talks to progress. This suspension was effective from 21st January 2020.

State Examinations

629. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the preparations being made to ensure the leaving certificate examinations will take place in 2021; her plans to introduce an additional element of continuous assessment from the start of the 2020-2021 academic year; if more question choice will be introduced on exam papers; when students can expect clarity on the 2021 leaving certificate and its format; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15432/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Following the school closure in March 2020, my Department published a range of guidance to assist schools and teachers in ensuring continuity of teaching and learning for students as well as supporting their wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This guidance aimed, inter alia, to ensure regular engagement of students in lessons, tasks and learning experiences across the range of curriculum subjects, provision of regular assignments and regular, practical, supportive and customised feedback on work submitted.

Schools adopted various ways to engage with their students in accordance with the technology and broadband resources available in school and at home, including by post, e-mails, communication apps, the school website, use of other digital communicative platforms, including live meetings. Schools were asked to be conscious of pupils who may not have access to online facilities and to adapt approaches so that these pupils continued to have the opportunity to participate in learning.

The aim of these distance learning approaches, the guidance which issued to all schools and the regular engagement with students, was to ensure that students stayed connected with and progressed their learning. These actions will, therefore, have helped to minimise the impact of school closure. The reopening in time for the start of the new school year remains a top priority for my department.

In the context of planning for a return to school which is underway, the Department recently published a report to Government on Planning for reopening schools in line with the Roadmap for reopening. This report is available on my Department's website.

My Department, in consultation with relevant agencies, including the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), identified the following key priorities in supporting students in re-engaging with the curriculum in the new school year:

1. The wellbeing and socialisation of students
2. Assessing where students are in terms of their learning
3. Identifying the additional supports that particular learners may require
4. Exploring options for remote provision that will compliment in-school provision and address curriculum gaps experienced during school closure.

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. My Department will continue to collabo-

rate with the NCCA to develop guidance to schools to assist them in their planning for the next school year so as to ensure that curricular priorities are delivered and that teaching and learning is optimal in these circumstances, guided at all times by public health advice.

Students going into sixth year in post primary schools are a group that will receive a particular focus in the context of their preparations for the Leaving Certificate examinations in 2021. The State Examinations Commission (SEC) has statutory responsibility for the operation of the state examinations. My Department will engage with the SEC and the NCCA in the development of fair and robust assessment arrangements in relation to both the Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations for 2021.

My Department is acutely aware of the challenges faced by students at this difficult time, and how the current circumstances will continue to present challenges into the future. The welfare of students is, and will continue to be, front and centre in all decision making.

School Staff

630. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason a school (details supplied) recently lost an English as an additional language, EAL, post; the reason for this, if it can be appealed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15435/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The staffing arrangements for primary schools for the 2020/21 school year, as set out in Circular 0018/2020 provides details on the staffing appeal process, which includes a criteria for schools with a significant EAL requirement to apply for additional resources.

Since the 2017/18 school year the Special Education Teaching allocation provides a single unified allocation for special educational support teaching needs to each school, based on each school's educational profile and also encompasses the Language Support (EAL) allocation that schools were allocated in previous years.

Under this allocation model, schools have been provided with a total allocation for special education needs support based on their school profile.

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

Under this allocation model, schools are frontloaded with resources, based on each school's profile, to provide supports immediately to those pupils who need it without delay.

Further additional temporary Language Support is also provided, as necessary, to schools that have high concentrations of pupils that require language (EAL) support.

The school referred to by the Deputy submitted an appeal on EAL grounds to the Primary Staffing Appeals Board and has been informed that the appeal has been successful, pending confirmation of enrolments on 30th September 2020.

DEIS Scheme

631. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a school (de-

tails supplied) can be designated as a DEIS school; the process involved; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15436/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is in the final stages of refinement of the DEIS identification model, based on school enrolment data and the latest data available from Census 2016 under the HP Deprivation Index.

This work is at an advanced stage and the initial phase of the consultation process with education stakeholder representatives on the technical aspects of the refined DEIS ID model has commenced. It is envisaged that this model will then provide the basis for development of a DEIS resource allocation system to match resources to identified need.

I am confident that the culmination of this work will facilitate the ultimate aim of matching resources to identified need and will allow us to target extra resources at those schools most in need. Until this work is complete, it is not intended to extend the DEIS programme to any further schools.

Schools Building Projects

632. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the details of a project (details supplied); the deadline for the scheme; the criteria for same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15456/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I can confirm that my Department is in receipt of an application for capital funding, for additional accommodation, from the school referred to by the Deputy. Officials from the Department are communicating with the school authority in this regard and the application is currently under assessment. As soon as the assessment process is complete a decision will issue to the school authority directly.

Schools Building Projects

633. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if officials and contractors employed by her Department will contact a school (details supplied) in advance of entering the building and carrying out works on the building; if they will start to comply with the school policy on Covid-19, including the wearing of face masks, one-way systems, sanitisers and timed arrivals; if the school will be returned to the condition it was in before works started 20 months ago; if carpets will be replaced after works, vents and wiring have damaged them; if her officials and the contractors will commit to meeting with the school management to resolve each of these matters; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15461/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department are currently working with the Patron, the School and Design Teams involved in the school referred to by the Deputy, to identify the issues outstanding from the essential first phase fire remediation and external wall structural remediation works which are nearing completion.

Once this list of issues has been reviewed by the design team, a meeting will be arranged with the Patron and the School to discuss the issues identified.

Guidance and protocols have been published to enable contractors meet the public health requirements since the re-opening of construction sites.

Special Educational Needs

634. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a taxi service will be made available for children availing of the July provision in 2020; if so, the application process; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15476/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): 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 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were 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.

With regard to transport arrangements for the Summer Programme my Department will provide grant funding to support families with the cost of transport arrangements for those children who are eligible for school transport and who have been approved to participate in the school based Summer Programme.

Schools are required to identify children who are on a School Transport service or who are in receipt of a grant. School Transport Section will be in contact with schools and families in regard to the arrangements for payment.

Grant payment is based on the distance that a family reside from their child's school of attendance. The calculation is based on four trips per day (home to school and school to home, morning and afternoon) multiplied by the number of days a child attends school for the programme. The current rate of grant is 39.12 cent per kilometre for the first 6,437 kilometres travelled and 21.22 per kilometre for each kilometre travelled thereafter.

Schools Building Projects

635. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of the progress of a building project (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15499/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The Deputy will be aware that a building project to provide a permanent building for the school in question is included on the Department's Capital Programme to be delivered as part of the National Development Plan (NDP). A site is being acquired for this purpose.

In tandem with this, my Department has initiated work on the preparation of the project brief and is liaising with the school as part this process.

Special Educational Needs Staff

636. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the reason a school (details supplied) is having its teacher allocation reduced by two; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15571/20]

14 July 2020

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): 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.

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.

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 the Special Education Review Committee (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.

The NCSE is currently preparing 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 achieve better outcomes.

The NCSE has 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.

The NCSE recently published their staffing allocation for 2020-21, and this is available on their website at www.ncse.ie.

I understand that my Department has received correspondence from the school referred to by the Deputy, on the matters raised. This is currently under consideration.

School Staff

637. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when an application for the award of incremental credit to teachers at second level will be approved for a person (details supplied) in County Mayo.; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15580/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The criteria for the award of incremental credit to recognised teachers is outlined in my Department's Circulars 10/2001, Primary, 29/2007 and 29/2010 Post-Primary. The criteria were agreed under the auspices of the Teachers Conciliation Council (TCC) which is comprised of representatives of teachers, school management, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the Department of Education & Skills and chaired by an official of the Workplace Relations Commission.

Applications for incremental credit were received from the person to whom the Deputy refers. Following a review of the applications the applicant was advised that they were incomplete. We await receipt of fully completed application forms.

School Transport

638. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if additional capacity and an extension of a post-primary school transport route will be sanctioned in respect of a service (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15592/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department.

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

In the 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were 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.

All 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 and are subject to a number of conditions including that a Transport Application Form is completed and submitted to Bus Éireann, that there is a suitable service, as determined by Bus Éireann, operating into their education centre; that there is spare capacity on the service, that routes will not be extended or altered, additional vehicles will not be introduced, nor will larger vehicles or extra trips using existing vehicles be provided to cater for children travelling on a concessionary basis.

All school transport services are reviewed over the summer months. Arising from this review, routes may be altered, extended or withdrawn depending on the number and location of eligible children who will be availing of school transport for the following school year.

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. To establish that the nearest school is full parents/guardians must provide certain documentary evidence including that an application for enrolment in the nearest school was made within the deadline dates specified by the school and confirmation from the School Authorities that the school was full. On foot of such correspondence from a number of parents in the area referred to by the Deputy, a number of children have been deemed eligible to the school in question and the pickup point for transport for these children has been extended as they are deemed eligible.

School Funding

639. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated cost of increasing the ancillary grant of €163 per pupil to €171.50 per pupil. [15615/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The current standard rate of Ancillary Grant is €171.00 per pupil. The estimated full year cost of increasing the rate of ancillary grant to €171.50 per pupil in primary schools is circa €0.3m.

The Ancillary Services grant was increased by €24 from 2016 to 2020, in order to enable primary schools to implement the arbitration salary increase for grant funded school secretar-

ies and caretakers and to also implement the restoration of salary for cleaners arising from the unwinding of FEMPI legislation.

The two main grants are the Capitation grant to cater for day to day running costs such as heating, lighting, cleaning, insurance, general up-keep etc. and the Ancillary Services grant to cater for the cost of employing ancillary services staff. Schools are permitted to regard the capitation and ancillary grants as a combined grant. It is a matter for each individual school to decide how best to apply the grant funding to suit its particular needs.

Question No. 640 answered with Question No. 529.

Schools Data

641. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the statistics and format used when determining the need for a secondary school in a particular area; and the breakdown of these figures for Gorey, Enniscorthy, New Ross and Wexford town, respectively. [15627/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): In order to plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and uses a Geographical Information System, using data from a range of sources, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise. With this information, my Department carries out nationwide demographic exercises to determine where additional school accommodation is needed at primary and post-primary level.

Major new residential developments in a school planning area have the potential to alter demand in that area. In that regard, as part of the demographic exercises, my Department engages with each of the local authorities to obtain the up-to-date data on significant new residential development in each area. This is necessary to ensure that schools infrastructure planning is keeping pace with demographic changes as there is a constantly evolving picture with planned new residential development.

Where data indicates that additional provision is required, the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may, depending on the circumstances, be provided through either one, or a combination of, the following:

- Utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools,
- Extending the capacity of a school or schools,
- Provision of a new school or schools.

As the Deputy will be aware, since April 2018 the Government announced plans for the establishment of 45 new schools over the four years 2019 to 2022.

This announcement follows nationwide demographic exercises carried out by my Department into the future need for primary and post-primary schools across the country.

In addition to the new schools announced, there will be a need for further school accommodation in other areas in the future through either planned capacity increases in existing schools or additional accommodation or extensions to existing schools.

While the announcement did not include a new post primary school for the school planning areas referred to by the Deputy, the requirement for new schools will be kept under on-going

review and in particular will have regard for the increased rollout of housing provision as outlined in Project Ireland 2040.

Under Project Ireland 2040, my Department continues to make progress to increase the infrastructural capacity in the schools sector, in order to meet demographic and other demands.

My Department will also continue to monitor areas where the accommodation of existing schools may need to be expanded in order to meet the needs of the local population.

Schools Building Projects

642. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the status of works at a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15628/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The Deputy will be aware that the project to which he refers has been devolved for delivery to the school authority under my Department's Summer Works Scheme. As such, it is a matter for the school authority to progress the project.

However, I can also inform the Deputy that officials in my Department are aware, from our regular engagement with the school in respect of this particular project, that a significant milestone in progressing it was achieved recently as a tender for the outstanding works at the school was advertised on the e-Tenders system.

Covid-19 Pandemic

643. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the possibility of creating a Covid-19 officer in schools to manage and oversee best practice has been investigated and considered; if so, if this role would be covered by existing staff; and if it would require external staff recruitment. [15630/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): On Wednesday 1 July 2020, I welcomed the publication of interim public health advice for the safe re-opening of schools in late August/September. This interim health advice sets out the key public health requirements that will be required for a safe full reopening of schools and the measures that will be required to achieve this.

Receipt of public health advice and the Return to Work Safely Protocol will underpin ongoing engagements with education partners and stakeholders in terms of planning and providing guidance for schools in relation to logistical and curricular arrangements and wellbeing, and including the issue raised by the Deputy.

My Department's ongoing work with education partners and other key stakeholders on guidance for re-opening schools is aimed at reducing the burden on schools at a local level by providing central guidance and supports to the greatest extent possible by the end of July in order to allow time for schools to implement the necessary arrangements locally.

Covid-19 Pandemic

644. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the timeline

for issuing official guidelines to school principals with regard to social distancing measures for each class age in primary schools. [15633/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): On Wednesday 1 July 2020, I welcomed the publication of interim public health advice for the safe re-opening of schools in late August/ September. This interim health advice sets out the key public health requirements that will be required for a safe full reopening of schools and the measures that will be required to achieve this.

Receipt of public health advice will underpin ongoing engagements with education partners and stakeholders in terms of planning and providing guidance for schools in relation to logistical, curricular and wellbeing arrangements. The public health advice outlines the requirements for physical distancing measures in a school setting and how this should be implemented. The advice also contains important measures required for infection prevention and control to ensure a full return to school is safe for children and staff.

My Department's ongoing work with education partners and other key stakeholders on guidance for re-opening schools is aimed at reducing the burden on schools at a local level by providing central guidance and supports to the greatest extent possible by the end of July in order to allow time for schools to implement the necessary arrangements locally.

Third Level Institutions

645. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of institutes of technology or technological universities currently running a deficit in tabular form; the plans in place by each institute to address the deficit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15643/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The latest set of audited accounts available for the IoT/technological sector is the 17/18 financial year. It should be noted by the Deputy that the audited accounts of each publically funded Higher Education Institution are available publically on the Oireachtas website. The accounts of two IOT's, IT Tralee and Waterford IT respectively indicated an accumulated deficit position.

IT Tralee - The 2017/18 accounts for IT Tralee show a deficit of €1.3m and the C&AG noted that the Institute has incurred deficits in each of the last six years and they had an accumulated revenue deficit of €4.3m at 31 August 2018.

In 2019, €5m of emergency funding was provided to IT Tralee with the approval of the Minister for Education and Skills. The Governing Body of IT Tralee was requested by the HEA and the Department of Education and Skills to develop, complete and approve a financial sustainability plan. A plan was submitted and reviewed by the HEA which includes actions to reduce the Institute's cost base and increase its income. This plan was submitted to the Department of Education and Skills in April 2020, and is currently being considered by the Department. It should be noted that the Covid-19 pandemic will bring additional challenges to IT Tralee with the expected loss of international student fees and additional costs.

WIT - The 2017/18 accounts for Waterford IT show a surplus of €0.11m for year ended 31st August 2018 and the C&AG noted that the Institute had an accumulated revenue deficit of €6.3m.

WIT has received a loan from the Department of Education and Skills which arose from a recommendation included in the report following the investigation by a statutory inspector on

the relationship between the Institute and the companies providing campus services to it. The loan, which amounted to €12.1m, is repayable over a period of twelve years and is interest free. The loan drawdown commenced in February 2014 and the balance outstanding at 31 August 2018 was €9.03m.

WIT has agreed a financial plan with the HEA to bring WIT back into a breakeven position, which includes new programme development linked to industry engagement, recruitment strategy to increase the student base and the implementation of a plan to address retention weaknesses. The HEA agreed a revised monitoring mechanism in 2019 and has been engaging closely with WIT to ensure the institute returns to at least a breakeven position.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

646. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills her views on the amount that will be required in additional funding for schools to cover issues related to Covid-19 hygiene by category of expenditure, item and sector; and the basis of the €25 million quoted in media accounts from Departmental sources. [15648/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): In re-opening our schools, my Department will be guided by the available public health advice and comprehensive engagement with stakeholders including the school management bodies and staff representatives as well as students and parents. I have published the interim public health advice received from the Health Protection Surveillance Centre and also made it available to schools across the country.

The receipt of this advice has allowed my Department to commence an intense period of engagement with school management and staff representatives which in turn has allowed it to engage with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The focus, since the public health advice was received, has been on working through with the stakeholders how we re-open our schools safely. I know there will be costs associated with re-opening and not just in terms of hand sanitisation or cleaning regimes. My Department is currently defining what is needed and preparing cost estimates for these elements. Engagement with colleagues in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is underway in regard to the financial support that will be necessary.

I can assure the Deputy that there is full engagement with the education stakeholders and that everyone is committed to concluding the scoping and planning phases by the end of this month so that schools have sufficient time to prepare at a local level for their re-opening. There will also be comprehensive communication with students and parents so that they are fully informed.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

647. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if funding will be provided for additional full-time cleaning staff in schools that currently have none; and the typical cost to schools for a full-time cleaner. [15649/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The Boards of Management of schools are responsible for the employment of ancillary staff. Funding to cater for these services is made available from my Department through the Ancillary Services and Capitation Grants. It is a matter for the Board of Management of the school to decide how best to apply the

grant funding to suit its particular needs.

My Department recognises that enhanced cleaning will be required to support schools to prevent COVID-19 infections and is engaging with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on the requirement to provide funding to support these enhanced cleaning needs and we will provide further details of the support available once the arrangements are finalised.

My Department will continue to engage closely with education partners and other key stakeholders on the plan for re-opening of schools for the 2020/21 school year with the aim of reducing the burden on schools at a local level by providing central guidance and supports to the greatest extent possible.

The terms and conditions of employment of cleaners in Primary and Voluntary Secondary schools is a matter for the Board of Management of each individual school, therefore, my Department does not hold information in relation to the typical cost of a full-time cleaner.

School Funding

648. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated cost of increasing the budget for school substitutes by 5%, 10%, 20% and 25%, respectively. [15650/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Substitute staff are employed by the managerial authorities of schools as replacements for teachers and Special Need Assistants absent on approved leave from their posts.

The details outlined in the Table is based on 2019 expenditure and covers the cost of employing substitutes for teachers and special need assistants. The information relates to substitute staff employed in Primary, Secondary, Community and Comprehensive schools and includes the cost of Employers PRSI:

2019 Expenditure	5% Increase	10% Increase	20% Increase	25% Increase
€264,493,460	€13,224,673	€26,449,346	€52,898,692	€66,123,365

The information for staff employed in Education and Training Board Schools would have to be obtained from the individual ETBs.

School Funding

649. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated cost of increasing the budget for release days for teaching principals by 5%, 10% and 20%; and if she will consider investing in additional leadership positions within schools to facilitate principals in prioritising ensuring that schools are Covid-19 safe. [15651/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): 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.

Since the moratorium on filling middle management posts was lifted in 2017, almost 1300 leadership posts have been invested in our primary schools which has led to 1 in 3 teachers now holding promoted positions. My Department has committed to revising the number of available Posts of Responsibility to take account of retirements during the school year. This ensures that the current level of Posts of Responsibilities are maintained in the school system.

Increasing the number of release days allocated to teaching principals by 5%, 10% and 20% would cost approximately €480,000, €1.1 million, and €2.2 million respectively.

School Transport

650. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she has considered that the cost of delivering school transport to eligible children will increase considerably due to Covid-19 restrictions; the increased cost expected to ensure a place for the same number of children as 2019. [15652/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): 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 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were 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.

With regard to the re-opening of schools for the 2020/21 academic year, my Department is currently engaging intensively with Bus Éireann, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the National Transport Authority on the logistical considerations that arise from public health advice in planning for the reopening of schools. 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 Supports

651. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills whether additional funding for Covid-19-related school costs will cover all costs, including refuse and partitions. [15653/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is engaging with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on the requirement to provide funding to support enhanced cleaning needs and we will provide further details of the support available once the arrangements are finalised.

Arrangements have also been made for a drawdown framework to be established to enable schools purchase hand-sanitisers for use in the school and classroom. The procurement process for this framework has already commenced and it is intended these materials will be available

in early August.

My Department will continue to engage closely with education partners and other key stakeholders on the plan for re-opening of schools for the 2020/21 school year with the aim of reducing the burden on schools at a local level by providing central guidance and supports to the greatest extent possible.

School Funding

652. Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire asked the Minister for Education and Skills the annual budget for information technology equipment for primary and secondary schools; the number of devices purchased from this per annum by category; and the estimated cost of increasing same by 5%, 10%, 15% and 20%, respectively. [15654/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): 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 in respect of the 2019-2020 school year. It is expected a further tranche of €50m will issue in the 2020-2021 school year.

Primary schools can use the Minor Works Grant for the provision of ICT infrastructure, and general capitation that issues to schools can also be used for that purpose.

This ICT Grant funding issues to schools, to facilitate them in developing their own approach to embedding digital technology in teaching and learning. Schools are best placed to determine the most appropriate solution to adopt in terms of supporting the learning needs of their students based on their own context and circumstances. Decisions as to what infrastructure is to be acquired and procurement of same is the responsibility of schools including purchase of devices and software.

Digital Strategy ICT annual grant funding

Year	€
2016/17	€30 million
2017/18	€30 million
2018/19*	€50 million
2019/2020**	€50 million

*Includes some €5million application based top up funding to schools

Schools have been very innovative in meeting the challenges posed by school closures. To further support schools to meet demands for continuity of learning an additional €10m top-up funding, part of the broader Digital Strategy investment, also issued to all schools in April. This was made available at this time to assist schools to support students 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, may be disadvantaged in their engagement with the school's remote teaching and learning where this is provided by digital means.

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/>.

School Accommodation

653. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated cost of moving a school (details supplied) to another location; and the setting up costs associated with same. [15670/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The proposed building at City West is State-owned and within my Department's control. It has provided high quality, fully serviced, permanently constructed accommodation for two other primary schools up until last September. There is currently over 30 permanent classrooms, full staff facilities, ancillary rooms and an external play area available for occupation before the start of the 2020 school year. The accommodation will also serve two new schools opening in the City West area this September. Minimal work is all that is required.

My Department has informed the school that appropriate transport will be facilitated from Firhouse to the interim accommodation at City West while the school is in City West, the cost of which cannot be known until it is tendered for.

The City West accommodation offers the possibility of ready-made permanent and cost-effective accommodation on an interim basis for Firhouse ETSS at no additional cost. My Department remains committed to working with and supporting the school to minimise in so far as possible any impact this temporary move may have.

School Transport

654. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the position in respect of the return of schools in September 2020 and school transport; if all students will have full access to school transport; the way in which school transport will operate in terms of social distancing; if the deadline for payment of school transport will be postponed beyond 30 July 2020 until full details on the return to school are confirmed in view of the fact that it is unclear for many whether they will return to school full time or have access to school transport; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15672/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): 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 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were 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.

With regard to the re-opening of schools for the 2020/21 academic year, my Department is currently engaging intensively with Bus Éireann, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the National Transport Authority on the logistical considerations that arise from public health advice in planning for the reopening of schools. The operation of school transport services in September 2020 will be informed by the outcome of this planning for re-opening schools.

The option to make payment for transport for the new academic year is now available with

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a closing date for payment on the 31 July 2020. Families wishing to avail of transport for the 2020/2021 year are advised to make payment by this date. There are no plans to extend this payment deadline.

Schools Administration

655. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when the guidelines for schools on their use of reduced hours for individual pupils will be completed; and if she plans to put in place a reporting and effective monitoring mechanism within the guidelines to ensure appropriate and limited use of reduced hours in schools and the necessary oversight at departmental level. [15725/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Draft guidelines were developed to provide clarity to schools around reduced timetables and to set out the procedures to be followed by schools where such an option is being considered and used. The guidelines provide for TUSLA Education Support Service to be notified if a reduced timetable is implemented.

The aim is to ensure that the use of reduced timetables is limited solely to those circumstances where it is absolutely necessary. The draft guidelines are underpinned by the principles that a reduced timetable should not be used as a sanction; that it should be applied proportionately and should last only as long as is necessary to facilitate a return to school on a full-time basis.

A consultation process with education stakeholders was carried out as part of the overall process of finalising the guidelines. It is intended to publish guidelines on reduced timetables in due course. In the interim as the Deputy is aware school buildings have been closed since March 12 due to Covid 19 and teachers were engaging with pupils remotely.

During the Covid-19 school closure period, my Department issued guidance to schools on continuation of learning, and this includes guidance on supporting pupils with special needs and pupils at risk of educational disadvantage. Guidance for parents is also available, including guidance where parents are concerned about the level of contact between the school and their child. These guidelines are available at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/continuity-of-schooling/continuity-of-schooling.html#schools>.

State Examinations

656. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when the process for providing leaving certificate results and the application of points for the entry process to third level education for external home-schooled students will be finalised and communicated; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15729/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): A system of Calculated Grades was put in place by my predecessor due to the inability to run the normal Leaving Certificate examinations. The purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

For the calculated grades system to be operated with integrity, an estimated percentage mark, based on credible, satisfactory evidence, can only be accepted from an appropriate source. This is necessary to ensure fairness to all students.

The Calculated Grades Executive Office in the Department of Education has developed a comprehensive guide to calculated grades for out of school learners – the students who are studying entirely outside of school – and has contacted each student individually on 25 June to invite them to apply for calculated grades. The closing date for applications was Thursday 2 July 2020 and applications are now being processed.

In cases where a student who is attending school, but who is studying one or more subjects outside of school, school principals were asked to make every effort to provide an estimated mark for that subject(s) provided there was sufficient, credible evidence available from an appropriate source. If the principal was unable to provide an estimated mark for any student they were asked to notify the Calculated Grades Executive Office of my Department.

As part of its commitment to ensure that a calculated grade is provided to as many students as possible, the CGEO are currently undertaking a review of these reports with the schools involved to ensure that the correct procedures were followed.

Despite every effort being made by schools and by the Department of Education, to provide calculated grades to as many students as possible, there will be a small number of cases where there is no credible evidence to support a calculated grade in a particular subject. To attempt to give a calculated grade in such cases would be unfair to all other candidates.

Such students will have an opportunity to sit the Leaving Certificate examinations when it is safe to do so.

No decisions have been issued by the Calculated Grades Office in respect of any of these students – either those studying independently, or those attending school but studying a subject (or subjects) outside school, to date.

The Department of Education has continued to engage with third level stakeholders regarding the Calculated Grades process for students seeking to progress to Higher Education. This has resulted in an agreed common approach in relation to students who have not been able to obtain calculated grades in one or more subjects. Students who have applied for a calculated grade, with a view to satisfying matriculation/basic minimum entry requirements and for whom the Department has been unable to award a Calculated Grade in the subject(s), will be granted an exemption in the subject(s) solely for matriculation/basic minimum entry purposes. The CGEO will notify the CAO of any student who cannot be provided with calculated grades, and of the subjects involved, and the exemption from matriculation/basic minimum entry will be granted automatically by the CAO. The subject(s) for which exemption is granted will not attract points and the exemption cannot be used to satisfy additional programme requirements over and above the matriculation/basic minimum entry requirements.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

657. Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated cost per annum to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio in primary and post-primary schools by one point and five points, respectively. [15731/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Budget 2020 has provided for a budget of more than €11 billion for the Department of Education and Skills in 2020. This is the highest ever allocation to the sector and an increase of nearly €2 billion since 2016.

The number of teachers has increased from 63,556 in 2015/16 to almost 70,900 in 2019/20, an increase of over 7,300 teaching posts.

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Teacher numbers at primary level have increased by almost 3,500 when comparing the 2015/16 school year with the current school year and this has led to a steady improvement in the pupil teacher ratio and average class size statistics during this period.

The latest figures in relation to pupil teacher ratio show an improved ratio of teachers to students from 16:1 to 15.2:1 at primary level when comparing the 2015/16 school year to the 2018/19 school year. Average class sizes at primary level improved from 24.9 to 24.3 in the same period. Corresponding statistics from post primary level show an improved ratio of teachers to students from 13.8:1 to 13:1 during the same period.

The annual staffing schedule determines the allocation of teachers to schools. For the current school year, it operates on a general average of 26 pupils to every 1 teacher (26:1) which is historically the lowest ever allocation ratio at primary level. At post-primary level teachers are allocated at a ratio of 19:1 in the Free Education System and 23:1 to schools in the fee-charging sector.

Each one point adjustment to the primary staffing schedule would cost approximately €14.5m, while on the post-primary side, the cost would be approximately €55.5m.

Covid-19 Pandemic

658. Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire asked the Minister for Education and Skills her views on whether it will be necessary to reduce class sizes in order to facilitate the distancing required for a return to school; the estimated number of additional teaching staff required to facilitate distancing; and the estimated increased cost for same. [15732/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): On Wednesday 1 July 2020, I welcomed the publication of interim public health advice for the safe re-opening of schools in late August/ September. This interim health advice sets out the key public health requirements that will be required for a safe full reopening of schools and the measures that will be required to achieve this.

Receipt of public health advice will underpin ongoing engagements with education partners and stakeholders in terms of planning and providing guidance for schools in relation to logistical, curricular and wellbeing arrangements. The public health advice outlines the requirements for physical distancing measures in a school setting and how this should be implemented. The advice also contains important measures required for infection prevention and control to ensure a full return to school is safe for children and staff.

My Department's ongoing work with education partners and other key stakeholders on guidance for re-opening schools is aimed at reducing the burden on schools at a local level by providing central guidance and supports to the greatest extent possible by the end of July in order to allow time for schools to implement the necessary arrangements locally.

School Accommodation

659. Deputy Seán Crowe asked the Minister for Education and Skills the consultation that was held with the management and board of a school (details supplied) prior to the announcement of its relocation to Citywest, County Dublin. [15777/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is in regular communication with the school's patron body, Educate Together, on this and other accommoda-

tion matters and the patron body keeps its school communities updated on an ongoing basis in relation to such matters. The school were offered an opportunity to view the Citywest accommodation in December last.

School Accommodation

660. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the high number of children with special needs attending a school (details supplied) was taken into consideration before the decision was taken to relocate the school to Citywest, County Dublin. [15778/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is in regular communication with the School's patron body Educate Together to discuss accommodation and all other relevant matters in relation to their school communities.

The accommodation available to the school in Citywest consist of 10 full size classrooms, resource rooms, offices and specialist rooms. The accommodation is more than adequate to provide for the needs of all of the pupils enrolled in the school.

Covid-19 Pandemic

661. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the steps being taken for schools to have enough teachers to reopen safely; whether it can be ensured that students with additional needs will not lose vital supports due to a lack of teaching resources; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15841/20]

670. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the person or body that will be responsible for the implementation and adherence management of public health guidelines in schools when they reopen; if principals and deputy principals will have an increased workload for this work; and if not, whether the necessary resources will be provided for an additional staff member to take on responsibility for same. [15882/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 661 and 670 together.

On Wednesday 1 July 2020, I welcomed the publication of interim public health advice for the safe re-opening of schools in late August/September. This interim health advice sets out the key public health requirements that will be required for a safe full reopening of schools and the measures that will be required to achieve this.

Receipt of public health advice and the Return to Work Safely Protocol will underpin ongoing engagements with education partners and stakeholders in terms of planning and providing guidance for schools in relation to logistical, curricular and wellbeing arrangements including the issue raised by the Deputy.

My Department's ongoing work with education partners and other key stakeholders on guidance for re-opening schools is aimed at reducing the burden on schools at a local level by providing central guidance and supports to the greatest extent possible by the end of July in order to allow time for schools to implement the necessary arrangements locally.

School Textbooks

662. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if she will report on the proposed free book pilot scheme due to commence in September 2020 as announced in budget 2020 and referenced in the programme for Government; and the 50 schools that will be availing of this free book scheme in September 2020 in tabular form. [15848/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department provides a book grant to all recognised primary and post primary schools within the Free Education Scheme in order to provide assistance for books including Book Rental Schemes. Under this scheme, the Department provided funding of €16.9 million in 2019 to all of these schools.

Additional funding of €1million provided under Budget 2020 was allocated to 102 Primary DEIS schools for a new pilot programme for the 2020/21 school year. The aim of this pilot is to provide free school books for students in the schools involved, and to support these schools in eliminating the cost of school books for parents. It will run for the period of one year and its effectiveness and impact will be monitored and evaluated before any decision is made as regards its possible extension or continuation. Under Circular 46/2013, DEIS schools receive a book grant of €21 per student. This pilot will provide an additional €64 per student to increase the overall book grant rate to €85 per student enrolled in the school. This additional funding issued to schools in May 2020.

A list of the 102 participating schools is published on the Department Of Education and Skills website and can be found at this link <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/DEIS-Delivering-Equality-of-Opportunity-in-Schools-/school-book-pilot-scheme-2020.pdf>.

Home School Community Liaison Scheme

663. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated cost of hiring ten additional home-school community liaison teachers. [15850/20]

664. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the estimated cost of ensuring there is one home-school community liaison teacher for each school currently without such a teacher; and the estimated cost of providing one such teacher for every three and five schools, respectively. [15851/20]

665. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills her views on whether there will be a need for home-school community liaison teachers due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. [15852/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 663 to 665, inclusive, together.

Based on an average cost of one Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinator position of circa €55,500, an additional 10 HSCL Coordinators would be in the order of € 555,000.

The HSCL Scheme is a school-based intervention provided to DEIS schools to address the needs of all pupils/families at risk of educational disadvantage through acknowledging and developing the role of the parent as prime educator.

Currently, all DEIS Urban Primary and DEIS Post Primary schools are included in the HSCL Scheme. The scheme is delivered by 415 full-time HSCL Coordinators who are teachers in these schools and assigned to HSCL duties either in individual schools or clusters of schools, catering for approximately 160,000 pupils in 523 schools.

During the Covid 19 school closure period, the teachers of pupils at risk of educational disadvantage in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools have been particularly focussed on ensuring that they provide support to these students. Schools and other education settings have various resources and supports available to them to assist them in meeting the needs of pupils at risk of educational disadvantage. These range from care teams and in-school management teams to the services of NEPS and Tusla Education Support Service (TESS). Schools in the DEIS programme have additional supports provided under the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme and the School Completion Programme (SCP).

Garda Vetting

666. Deputy Gary Gannon asked the Minister for Education and Skills if her Department will take over responsibility for and centralise the process of Garda vetting applications from special needs assistants in order to allow for the creation of substitute panels and opportunities for SNAs to be quickly deployed to new schools if necessary. [15854/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): In April 2016, the Minister for Justice and Equality commenced the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Acts 2012 to 2016 (the Vetting Act) which put in place statutory requirements for the Garda vetting of persons involved in working with children and vulnerable persons.

The Vetting Act applies not just to schools but to any relevant organisation that employs, contracts, permits or places a person in relevant work with children or vulnerable persons. The Vetting Act provides that vetting is conducted by the National Vetting Bureau on foot of an application by a relevant organisation that is registered with it. The vetting legislation and the vetting procedures operated by the National Vetting Bureau fall within the remit of the Minister for Justice and Equality.

When the vetting requirements were commenced in 2016, my Department issued circular 0031/2016 which set out the statutory vetting requirements applicable to schools along with the practical arrangements in place to support the vetting procedures. A Frequently Asked Questions document was also published by my Department to assist schools with queries in respect of the Circular.

At the same time, the vetting related provisions of the Teaching Council (Amendment) Act, 2015 were commenced. The existence of the Teaching Council, as a statutory body with a statutory role in the registration of registered teachers, enabled my Department to bring forward the relevant legislative provisions under the Teaching Council Amendment Act 2015 which allowed for such a streamlined mechanism to be put in place in the case of registered teachers.

However, it is not possible for my Department to put in place similar legislative arrangements in respect of non-teaching staff, such as Special Needs Assistants (SNAs).

The Vetting Act provides that a relevant organisation must, other than in certain limited circumstances, obtain a vetting disclosure from the National Vetting Bureau prior to commencing the employment of an employee to undertake relevant work with children or vulnerable adults. Each school is a relevant organisation under the Vetting Act and the creation of a panel of potential SNA employees, including a panel of substitutes, across schools would not obviate the obligation of each individual school to obtain a vetting disclosure prior to employing a person from such a panel.

The Vetting Act however allows for some limited exemptions to this requirement, including certain exemptions that are applicable in the case of recurring substitute employments such as

a recurring substitute SNA employment. The Act's exemptions in respect of substitute employments are set out in section 5.3 of my Department's Circular.

Under the new statutory vetting procedures, the vetting of SNAs and other non-teaching staff continues to be conducted via the relevant diocesan office or school management body as the relevant conduit organisation for the vetting of SNAs and other non-teaching staff employed by schools. In the case of ETB schools the relevant ETB is the relevant organisation for such vetting.

Special Educational Needs Staff

667. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if her Department will increase the minimum qualification needed to become a SNA to a level 6 qualification in order to aid the sector's call for greater professionalisation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15857/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The current entry level qualification for Special Needs Assistants is set out in my Department's circular 0051/2019 which requires a FETAC level 3 major qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications, OR a minimum of three grade Ds in the Junior Certificate, OR the Equivalent. This remains unchanged.

The Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme was published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018. The Review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs. While SNAs are very much valued in the provision of care support, the Review recommended that a more broadly based set of supports was required including therapeutic supports. The current School Inclusion Pilot involving 78 schools is based on this recommendation.

The Review also referenced SNA qualifications and training. One of the recommendations of the Review was the development of a national training programme at FETAC level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications for existing and new SNAs. A quality training programme is being developed and will be available to all SNAs from January next. The aim of the programme is to ensure that all SNAs have the skills and competencies to carry out their care support role in schools.

While many SNAs have qualifications above the entry requirement, there are no plans to change the qualifications required for appointment.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

668. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if her Department will provide increased financial support up front to schools in order to allow for the necessary increase in the number of cleaning staff prior to schools reopening; if so, when this will be made available; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15858/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is engaging with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on the requirement to provide funding to support enhanced cleaning needs and we will provide further details of the support available once the arrangements are finalised.

Arrangements have also been made for a drawdown framework to be established to enable

schools purchase hand-sanitisers for use in the school and classroom. The procurement process for this framework has already commenced and it is intended these materials will be available in early August.

My Department will continue to engage closely with education partners and other key stakeholders on the plan for re-opening of schools for the 2020-21 school year with the aim of reducing the burden on schools at a local level by providing central guidance and supports to the greatest extent possible.

State Examinations

669. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of students who are ineligible for a predicted grade for the leaving certificate 2020 due to studying independently without a teacher or tutor; and the suggested recourse for these students. [15861/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): A system of Calculated Grades was put in place by my predecessor due to the inability to run the normal Leaving Certificate examinations. The purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

For the calculated grades system to be operated with integrity, an estimated percentage mark, based on credible, satisfactory evidence, can only be accepted from an appropriate source. This is necessary to ensure fairness to all students.

The Calculated Grades Executive Office in the Department of Education has developed a comprehensive guide to calculated grades for out of school learners – the students who are studying entirely outside of school – and has contacted each student individually on 25 June to invite them to apply for calculated grades. The closing date for applications was Thursday 2 July 2020 and applications are now being processed.

In cases where a student who is attending school, but who is studying one or more subjects outside of school, school principals were asked to make every effort to provide an estimated mark for that subject(s) provided there was sufficient, credible evidence available from an appropriate source. If the principal was unable to provide an estimated mark for any student they were asked to notify the Calculated Grades Executive Office of my Department.

As part of its commitment to ensure that a calculated grade is provided to as many students as possible, the CGEO are currently undertaking a review of these reports with the schools involved to ensure that the correct procedures were followed.

Despite every effort being made by schools and by the Department of Education, to provide calculated grades to as many students as possible, there will be a small number of cases where there is no credible evidence to support a calculated grade in a particular subject. To attempt to give a calculated grade in such cases would be unfair to all other candidates.

Such students will have an opportunity to sit the Leaving Certificate examinations when it is safe to do so.

No decisions have been issued by the Calculated Grades Office in respect of any of these students – either those studying independently, or those attending school but studying a subject (or subjects) outside school, to date.

The Department of Education has continued to engage with third level stakeholders regarding the Calculated Grades process for students seeking to progress to Higher Education. This has resulted in an agreed common approach in relation to students who have not been able to obtain calculated grades in one or more subjects. Students who have applied for a calculated grade, with a view to satisfying matriculation/basic minimum entry requirements and for whom the Department has been unable to award a Calculated Grade in the subject(s), will be granted an exemption in the subject(s) solely for matriculation/basic minimum entry purposes. The CGEO will notify the CAO of any student who cannot be provided with calculated grades, and of the subjects involved, and the exemption from matriculation/basic minimum entry will be granted automatically by the CAO. The subject(s) for which exemption is granted will not attract points and the exemption cannot be used to satisfy additional programme requirements over and above the matriculation/basic minimum entry requirements.

Question No. 670 answered with Question No. 661.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

671. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if schools are preparing for the continuation of partial remote learning in September 2020; the supports being put in place for children returning to schools that have little or no access to a reliable broadband service; if these children will have to undertake schoolwork at home using schoolbooks rather than remote learning; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15886/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The number one priority for my Department and the wider schools sector is to re-open our schools as fully, normally and safely as possible at the start of the new school year. The interests of students and their families, as well as the safety of the staff in our schools, are at the centre of all considerations as we work through the various challenges associated with that aim. The re-opening our schools will be guided by the available public health advice and comprehensive engagement with stakeholders including the school management bodies and staff representatives as well as students and parents. I published the interim public health advice received from the Health Protection Surveillance Centre to make it available to all schools.

Notwithstanding my Department's overall objective, planning for a blended/remote learning approach may, by necessity, be a feature of the planning to reopen schools to ensure contingency and capacity in schools to provide for continuity of learning if required. My Department's Inspectorate, the NCCA, SEC and other experts, as required, are working to develop guidance on how to tailor teaching, learning and assessment to appropriately meet the needs of all students as they re-engage with school.

Schools have been very innovative in supporting their students during the school closures including developing measures to address challenges where the schools and or students are in areas with poor no broadband services.

My Department will continue to work with all stakeholders to address the various challenges and everyone involved is committed to concluding planning for reopening by the end of this month so that schools have sufficient time to prepare at a local level for their re-opening. I am also committed to full and comprehensive communication with schools, teachers, students and parents so that they are fully informed about the plans for reopening schools for the next school year.

School Transport

672. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education and Skills her views on increasing the school transport remote area grant to reflect the cost for children who live on an island and attend school on the mainland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15898/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department.

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

In the 2019/2020 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

Under the terms of my Department's School Transport Schemes children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 3.2 kms from and are attending their nearest national or reside not less than 4.8 kms from and are attending their nearest post primary school/ education centre as determined by my Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

An eligible child for whom no transport service is available may, following an application for transport within prescribed time limits, receive a Remote Area Grant towards the cost of private transport arrangements. This grant is also payable for eligible children who may have to travel 3.2 kms or more to or from a designated pick up/set down point.

The grant amount is distance related and is payable annually at a fixed daily rate, to each eligible family, regardless of the number of children from the same family, travelling to a particular school.

There are no plans to change the rate of the remote area grant.

Schools Building Projects

673. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education and Skills further to Parliamentary Question No. 229 of 30 June 2020, if a school extension (details supplied) will be built in time for the 2020-21 school year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15908/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to inform the Deputy that the project to which she refers has been devolved to the National Development Finance Agency (NDFA) for delivery as part of a programme of school building projects.

The NDFA is currently undertaking the second phase of the process of appointment of multi-disciplinary technical advisors (design teams) for these projects. Thereafter, it 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 but it will not be completed for the start of the 2020/2021 school year.

School Staff

674. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the criteria used by the appeals board to adjudicate on the allocation of teaching posts has been modified in light of Covid-19 and taking into account the increased requirements for social distancing when schools return; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15910/20]

676. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the factors considered when the appeals board made its decision regarding the need for an additional teacher at a school (details supplied); the reason the appeal by the school was denied; if her attention has been drawn to the fact that, as a result of the rejection of the appeal, class sizes in the school will be 27% above the national average of 26; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15920/20]

677. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a copy of the appeal submitted by a school (details supplied) will be made available as a matter of public record; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15921/20]

678. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the consideration given by the appeals board to the current Covid-19 climate in the context of an appeal by a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15922/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 674 and 676 to 678, inclusive, together.

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 appeals criteria are set out in Circular 18/2020, “Staffing Arrangements for Primary Schools for the 2020/21 School Year”. The appeal received from the school referred to by the Deputy has been refused by the Primary Staffing Appeals Board on the basis that the grounds of the appeal do not warrant a departure from the staffing schedule. The Primary Staffing Appeals Board is independent of the Department and its decision is final.

On 12 June, my Department published the report to Government “Planning for reopening schools in line with the Roadmap for reopening society and business” <https://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Announcements/framework-for-reopening-and-operating-schools.html>.

The report sets out the clear ambition to develop a sustainable plan to fully reopen schools at the start of the next school year in late August/September in line with normal timeframes. The overriding objective of the plan is to protect the health of staff and students while promoting the educational and development needs of children.

The report also sets out in brief the contingencies that must be considered, during the coming period in the context of Covid-19. The Department is engaging with the education partners and other key stakeholders on working through these contingencies in detail and on the development of guidance and supports for the reopening of schools. This includes measures in relation to social distancing which will be informed by the development of guidance in relation to infection prevention and control in schools. This guidance will also provide a framework for

individual schools to develop plans for the reopening of school in accordance with their own circumstances, the context and needs of their staff and students, and in compliance with public health guidelines. These contingencies and guidance will be worked through in detail in the coming weeks with education partners and stakeholders to ensure that the return to school is safe for children and staff.

School Costs

675. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if a statement will be issued to each school clarifying the situation with regard to placing additional costs on parents in response to Covid-19 health and safety protocols when children go back to school in September 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15913/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Receipt of public health advice will underpin ongoing engagements with education partners and stakeholders in terms of planning and providing guidance for schools in relation to logistical and curricular arrangements, wellbeing and the issues raised by the Deputy.

My Department recognises that additional funding will be required for schools to prevent COVID-19 infections. My Department is engaging with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on the requirement to provide funding to schools for this purpose.

My Department has also arranged for a drawdown framework to be established to enable schools purchase hand-sanitisers for use in the school and classroom. The procurement process for this framework has already commenced and it is intended these materials will be available in early August.

My Department's ongoing work with education partners and other key stakeholders on guidance for re-opening schools is aimed at reducing the burden on schools at a local level by providing central guidance and supports to the greatest extent possible by the end of July in order to allow time for schools to implement the necessary arrangements locally.

Questions Nos. 676 to 678, inclusive, answered with Question No. 674.

Third Level Admissions

679. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of students that progressed onto third level education in 2019, by county in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15957/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is responsible for the collection, analysis and dissemination of student and graduate data from all HEA-funded higher education institutions.

The latest available HEA data relates to enrolments in the 2018/2019 academic year. Data in relation to enrolments in the 2019/2020 academic year are currently being returned by institutions to the HEA for collation and audit. This process has been delayed due to the impact of COVID-19. The data will be published on the HEA's website: www.heai.ie when available.

Emergency Works Scheme

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680. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Education and Skills when a school (details supplied) in County Sligo will receive a decision on funding for emergency works at the school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15968/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The Deputy will be aware that the school to which he refers has been approved for funding, under my Department's Emergency Works Scheme, for the works in question.

The current position is that a tender report in respect of these works was received but further information in relation to the cost of same had to be obtained from the school authorities in order to make a decision on the matter. This information has now been received. A decision will be made in a timely manner in that respect and notified to the school directly.

Third Level Institutions

681. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if universities and institutes of technology have notified her, either separately or through their representative organisations, regarding their current financial position in view of the Covid-19 pandemic; and if a request for additional funding has been made by them. [15970/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): Since the onset of Covid-19 in March, my Department and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) have collaborated with key stakeholders from the Higher Education sector, including the Irish Universities Association, (IUA) and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) to identify, quantify and develop options to mitigate the financial impacts of Covid 19 on the sector.

A stakeholder working group chaired by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), including representatives from my Department, the IUA, THEA and TU Dublin, worked to collect information on the overall increased costs and projected income losses advised by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) arising from the crisis, based on an agreed set of assumptions

In addition to the sectoral analysis the HEA and representative bodies engaged closely to provide specific and granular institutional-level detail essential to safeguard individual institutions and the sector as a whole and to inform the process of examining options to support the sustainability of the sector. Furthermore my Department has met with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to discuss the potential impact of COVID on the sector and the issue has also been highlighted at Government.

The provision of additional financial support in order that the sector can contribute fully to economic recovery and to meeting priority skill needs is currently being assessed and my Department will continue to engage with key stakeholders to underpin the achievement of this objective.

School Facilities

682. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of primary and post-primary schools that have access to adequate hot water; the estimated cost to ensure that every school has hot water; and if all schools will have access to hot water in view of the current pandemic. [16000/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): The specific information requested by the Deputy regarding the number of primary and post-primary school that have ac-

cess to hot water is not readily available within my Department.

The Covid 19 Interim Recommendations for the reopening of schools and educational facilities public health guidance states that while warm running water is preferable for handwashing, that cold water is sufficient. In schools which do not have warm running water, a soap that emulsifies easily in cold water will be provided.

It is also recognised that the existing handwashing facilities in schools are not designed for the enhanced level of handwashing envisaged in a post COVID-19 environment without significantly impacting on educational class time including the requirement for a high level of supervision by teachers to ensure pupils wash their hands properly.

The public health guidance also states that hand sanitiser can be used. It is anticipated hand-sanitisers in key areas in every school in the country, as well as in every classroom will be provided. To enable the supply of sanitizer fluid for each school, a drawdown framework for use by schools to purchase sanitiser etc. (as well as other potential PPE requirements) is in the process of being established by the Department.

School Accommodation

683. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Education and Skills if the board of management of a school (details supplied) will be entitled to rent additional space in order to accommodate the students in the school in a safe manner; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16112/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to confirm to the Deputy that an application has been received, by my Department, in relation to the school concerned. The application is currently under assessment and once complete, the school authorities will be notified directly.

Public Inquiries

684. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Education and Skills the number of tribunals, public investigations and commissions of investigations in process; the length of time each has been under way; when each will conclude; the cost to date of each; and the estimated cost of each at completion. [16133/20]

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley): I can confirm to the Deputy that there are no tribunals, public investigations and commissions of investigation in process in my Department.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

685. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the position regarding a Covid-19 crisis payment for a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14707/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) was introduced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic emergency. As stipulated in the scheme guidelines both employees and self-

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employed people can apply for the payment if they satisfy a number of qualifying conditions as set out below.

In order to qualify for the payment, an applicant must:

- be aged between 18 and 66 years old and
- be currently living in the Republic of Ireland and
- have lost their job due to the COVID-19 pandemic or
- have been temporarily laid off due to the COVID-19 pandemic and
- have worked in the Republic of Ireland or were a cross border frontier worker and
- not be in receipt of any employment income.

The person applied online for Covid-19 PUP on 31/3/2020 and received the weekly income support of €350 from 6/4/2020 to 8/6/2020 inclusive.

However, the person concerned advised immigration officials at Dublin Airport on 27/4/2020 that he had left the State on 1/3/2020. He was therefore not in the State at the time of his application for the Covid-19 PUP. The claim was stopped by the Department's Special Investigations Unit (SIU) on 5/6/2020. The person concerned was issued a review notice and SIU has had no further communication with him.

It would appear now that the claim made by the person concerned for a Covid-19 PUP was invalid and there may be an overpayment due to the Department.

It is open to the person to review the eligibility criteria for Covid-19 PUP at the Department's website www.Gov.ie/DEASP and to submit a further application if he feels he now meets the qualifying criteria.

If the person concerned considers he may have an entitlement to payments under Jobseeker's Benefit/Allowance or Supplementary Welfare Allowance, he can obtain further information or apply online at www.mywelfare.ie. Alternatively he can phone 1890 800 024 and request the relevant application form.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Job Losses

686. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of businesses that have notified her Department regarding their intention to consider collective redundancies in June 2020; the number of jobs involved by county in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14817/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Section 12 of the Protection of Employment Act 1977 provides that employers proposing a collective redundancy must notify the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection of the proposed collective redundancy.

The statistics in relation to collective redundancy notifications for June 2020 are -

Redundancy Notifications	June
Number of Notifications Received	37
Number of Potential Redundancies Advised	1,464

My Department monitors that the legislative requirements for consultation and notification of potential redundancies to the Minister are complied with.

I am advised that it is not possible to confirm if the actual number of redundancies occurring will correlate to that advised to me as Minister as a potential redundancy.

I am further advised that statistics are not retained on a county by county basis.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Disability Definitions

687. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a claim for disability status by a person (details supplied) has been granted; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14925/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I confirm that an application from this lady for disability allowance (DA) was received by the Department on 7 March 2019.

The application was referred to a social welfare inspector (SWI) for a report on the person's means and circumstances. To date the investigating officer has been unable to determine her place of residence. The person concerned has also failed to supply information which was requested by this Department.

Once the person concerned supplies all requested information, the investigating officer can finalise his/her report and submit to DA section. A decision will then be made on this lady's entitlement to DA and she will be notified directly of the outcome.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

688. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to review the existing timeframe of the pandemic unemployment payment in respect of self-employed persons who work in the events industry; and if her attention has been drawn to the fact that if public health advice force events to either cancel or postpone later into the year many of these persons will be forced into permanent unemployment and the closure of their businesses. [15098/20]

689. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a means testing procedure has been considered regarding future amendments to the pandemic unemployment payment (details supplied). [15099/20]

727. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding an anomaly in Covid-19 payments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15071/20]

731. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protec-

tion the way in which the pandemic unemployment payment of a person would be affected if the recipient was able to source casual work, that is, for a few days per month; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15158/20]

753. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the consequences for those in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment but accept short-term work for a day, several days or longer to maintain links with their pre-Covid-19 employment relationships and contracts; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15413/20]

754. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the consequences for those who accept work while on jobseeker's for the self-employed or jobseeker's for those who were in full employment but were let go at the onset of the Covid-19 crisis and the short-term work scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15414/20]

756. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a system will be created by which those on the pandemic unemployment payment can accept sporadic work, declare it, offset that amount against the payment, yet retain the payment until such time as the live events sector and other sectors in prolonged Covid-19 shutdown return to normal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15416/20]

759. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans for the pandemic unemployment payment and self-employed persons who will not be able to return to full employment due to space restrictions (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15513/20]

764. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the consequences for those who accept work while receiving the pandemic unemployment payment or another unemployment payment (details supplied); and her views on the matter especially in terms of artists working in the arts and culture sector or involved in the live events production industry. [15528/20]

766. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if consideration has been given to the creation of a system that would allow persons in receipt of a pandemic unemployment payment to avail of sporadic work, declare same and offset that amount against the payment without having to lose their entitlement to the payment (details supplied). [15530/20]

772. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the consequences for self-employed persons who work in the event industry and accept work while receiving a pandemic or other unemployment payment such as payments (details supplied). [15618/20]

774. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if her Department can create a system by which self-employed persons involved in the events industry on the pandemic unemployment payment can accept sporadic work, declare it, offset that amount against the payment yet retain their payments until such time as live events return to normal or they leave the live events industry permanently to find alternative employment in another sector. [15620/20]

786. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will address the issue of members of an association (details supplied) having their pandemic unemployment payments reduced; the further supports available for this sector of

society that continue to be without work as live music venues remain closed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15992/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 688, 689, 727, 731, 753, 754, 756, 759, 764, 766, 772, 774 and 786 together.

The COVID-19 pandemic unemployment payment was introduced as a time limited emergency measure in response to the pandemic and has been extended until 10th August. A two level payment structure has also been introduced to link the pandemic unemployment payment level to prior earnings. As we gradually move through the phases of reopening our society and the economy, the pandemic unemployment payment will be assessed to see how it fits into cross-Government plans to keep Ireland healthy while continuing to get the country working again.

The conditions for receipt of this payment are that a person must have lost their employment due to the pandemic and are now fully unemployed. A self-employed person must have suffered a collapse in their trading income to the extent that they are available to take up other full-time work. Where a self-employed individual has regular employment or it generates significant income, then they should close their pandemic unemployment payment on the basis that they do not satisfy the conditions for the payment. In cases of doubt where emergency or sporadic work is undertaken, an individual should discuss the matter with the Department. In the case where a person is not satisfied with a decision to withdraw their pandemic unemployment payment on the basis of their level of engagement in employment, they can have this decision reviewed.

If a person is ineligible for the pandemic unemployment payment as they are engaged in employment, they may be entitled to support under the jobseekers benefit or jobseekers allowance scheme depending on their individual circumstances. A person in receipt of a jobseeker's payment may take up employment but they must be unemployed for at least 4 days in 7 consecutive days to be eligible for a payment and continue to satisfy the other qualifying conditions of the schemes.

Jobseekers benefit (self-employed) is available for self-employed people who have ceased trading and is not available while a person is engaged in self-employment.

The Enterprise Support Grant has recently been extended and will be made available to small business owners who transition from the pandemic unemployment payment to re-open their business. The grant, of up to €1,000, will be payable to self-employed micro enterprises which employ fewer than 10 people, have an annual turnover of less than €1 million and are not eligible for support from the COVID 19 Business Restart Grant or other similar business reopening grants. The Department is developing the systems to put it into effect and will communicate how to access the grant in the coming weeks.

I trust that this clarifies the matter.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

690. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if consideration will be given to seasonal workers who were not entitled to the Covid-19 payment in view of the fact they had not returned to work in March 2020; if the scheme will be reviewed to take such persons into consideration (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15243/20]

728. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will address a matter regarding seasonal workers (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15075/20]

734. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans in respect of supports for seasonal workers who had not returned to work by the deadline in March 2020 and that face little prospect of employment for the remainder of 2020; if she is making provision for implications for 2021 due to the fact these workers are not currently in a position to pay stamps; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15187/20]

737. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if provision will be made for those in receipt of jobseeker's benefit to retain some of their PRSI stamps in view of the fact that their ability to seek work was restrained due to Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15236/20]

739. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the measures her Department has taken to provide supports to seasonal workers, such as those employed in summer camps, who have lost income due to Covid-19 but are not covered by the pandemic unemployment payment. [15250/20]

781. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to or partly reimburse students fully who usually work summer jobs to fund university education but can no longer do so due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15936/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 690, 728, 734, 737, 739 and 781 together.

The COVID 19 pandemic unemployment payment was introduced as an emergency measure to meet the surge in unemployment which resulted from the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic.

One of the conditions for receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment are that a person must have been in employment immediately before 13th March and lost their income from employment. Where a person was due to take up seasonal employment but they were not in employment immediately prior to 13th March they are not eligible to receive the pandemic unemployment payment. It would be impossible to construct a scheme based on claims of potential or prospective but unrealised employment, particularly where the economy was operating at full-employment with many unfilled vacancies prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

People who do not qualify for the pandemic unemployment payment are eligible to apply for a jobseekers payment. Jobseeker's benefit is a weekly payment to people who have lost their employment and who satisfy the scheme's statutory conditions including the requirement to have sufficient social insurance contributions paid. This benefit is paid for 9 months (234 days) for people with 260 or more PRSI contributions paid and for 6 months (156 days) for people who have less than 260 paid. Where a person does not re-qualify or has used up their entitlement to jobseeker's benefit they can apply for the means tested jobseeker's allowance.

I trust this clarifies the position at this time.

Gender Recognition

691. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection

the status of the review of the Gender Recognition Act 2015; the circumstances in which it will be permissible for a child to change gender without parental consent; the minimum age that a child must reach before he or she can change gender; if the self-declaration process of gender change is to be introduced for children under 16 years of age; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15423/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):

The report of the group established to conduct a review of the Gender Recognition Act 2015 was published in July 2018. Under legislative proposals to implement some of the recommendations contained in the report, there are no circumstances in which it will be permissible for a child to change gender without parental consent and the current minimum age for legal gender recognition will remain at 16 years.

Included in the legislative proposals are the following measures:

- Simplify the path to legal gender recognition for children aged 16/17 years by introducing an arrangement for self-declaration, with parental consent; a simple revocation process; and by making family mediation support available on a voluntary basis;

- Identify clearly on a gender recognition certificate for 16 and 17 year olds that it is awarded on the basis of self-declaration only. This is in order to bring greater clarity to the fact that legal gender recognition is separate and distinct from any question of medical intervention.

A number of other recommendations are more administrative in nature and are being implemented or will be progressed under Ireland's National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019 – 2021.

The legislative proposals relating to children over 16 years, and the commissioning of research to examine issues of concern relating to children aged under 16 years, are included in the current Programme for Government.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

692. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the Covid-19 rent supplement scheme will be extended beyond August 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15493/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):

Rent supplement continues to play a key role in supporting families and individuals in private rented accommodation, with the scheme currently supporting approximately 21,200 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. The scheme ensures that for those who were renting, and due to temporary loss of employment, can continue to meet their rental commitments.

Since the introduction of the Government's Covid emergency response approximately 7,150 customers have been provided rent supplement support and remain in payment;. In addition, there are currently, some 1,200 pending customers awaiting a decision or in the process of providing the necessary documentation to the officer dealing with their claim.

The Department's current flexible rent supplement response has been extended to end-August 2020 and remains under review within context of the overall Government response to the

Covid-19 emergency.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

693. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will accept self-assessed income for 2019 from self-employed persons, as would be accepted by the Revenue Commissioners for tax purposes, as reference year evidence of income for the purposes of determining the level of continued payment of the pandemic unemployment payment rather than only using 2018 as self-employed reference year income to determine the level of continued payment (details supplied). [15577/20]

695. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason for the reduction of the pandemic unemployment payment to taxi drivers in view of the serious continuing impact on passenger numbers as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15780/20]

777. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason for the reduction of the pandemic unemployment payment to taxi drivers in view of the serious continuing impact on passenger numbers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15781/20]

779. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the supports available to a self-employed taxi driver impacted by Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15828/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):
I propose to take Questions Nos. 693, 695, 777 and 779 together.

The COVID-19 pandemic unemployment payment was introduced as a time limited emergency measure in response to the pandemic and which has been extended to 10th August. A two level payment structure has been introduced to link the pandemic unemployment payment level to prior earnings.

If a recipient's gross weekly earnings were €200 or higher then there is no change to their rate of payment. If a person's gross weekly earnings were under €200 then the rate of the pandemic unemployment payment has been adjusted to €203 per week which is in line with the standard personal rate of jobseeker's benefit. The majority of recipients, approximately 75%, have not been impacted by this change in rate.

Where a person is self-employed their average weekly income for 2018 was used to determine their rate of payment which is the last tax year for which complete data on self-employed income is available.

Any person who feels that the assessment of their earnings, based on returns already submitted to Revenue, is inaccurate can ask for a review of their case with further details available on www.gov.ie.

Where a person's rate is reduced to the flat rate €203 per week and their family circumstances are that they have adult or child dependents in their household it may be more financially beneficial to apply for a jobseeker's payment.

A self-employed person who is continuing to operate their business at a reduced level may

be eligible for support under the means tested jobseekers allowance scheme.

There are a range of supports available to employers from other Government Departments including the Department of Business, Department of Children and the Revenue Commissioners. Information on these supports is available gov.ie. My Department also recently announced the extension of the Enterprise Support Grant which will be made available to small business owners who transition from the Pandemic Unemployment Payment to re-open the business. The grant, of up to €1,000, will be payable to self-employed micro enterprises which employ fewer than 10 people, have an annual turnover of less than €1 million and are not eligible for support from the COVID 19 Business Restart Grant or other similar business reopening grants. The Department is developing the systems to put it into effect and will communicate how to access the grant in the coming weeks.

I trust that this clarifies the matter.

Social Insurance

694. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the estimated amount of additional revenue that would be generated if the 2.6% PRSI of classes B, C or D increased to 3% or a minimum of €315. [15614/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): It is understood from clarification received from the Deputy that the question refers to both employer and employee PRSI charges increasing to 3% or a minimum payment of €315.

It is estimated that an increase to the employee and employer rates of PRSI to 3% for PRSI Classes B, C and D would yield additional full year revenue of €70m.

Applying a minimum payment of €315, based on current rates, for employees and employers in respect of Classes B, C and D would yield an estimated additional full year revenue of €1.4m.

These estimates are based on the latest available data and reflects macro-economic indicators for 2020.

These estimates do not take into account any possible changes in contributor behaviour arising from increasing the rates of contribution.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 695 answered with Question No. 693.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

696. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when the small business grant will be open for applications. [15823/20]

716. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when the applications will be available for the enterprise support grant for businesses impacted by Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14969/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 696 and 716 together.

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The Enterprise Support Grant is being extended to assist eligible self-employed recipients who are exiting the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment scheme after 25 June 2020 to re-start their business. A once-off grant will be awarded for 80% of eligible costs up to a maximum of €1,000 covering vouched costs associated with re-opening a business which was closed due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The grant will be available to self-employed individuals who satisfy the scheme conditions including, employing fewer than 10 people, having an annual turnover of less than €1 million and not being liable for commercial rates. This grant is available for micro enterprises that are not eligible for other similar COVID business re-start grants from other Government Departments.

Funding of €12 million has been provided for this grant and my Department is developing the systems to put this grant into effect and will communicate how to apply for the grant over the coming weeks.

I trust that this clarifies the position at this time.

Youth Unemployment

697. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the position regarding the development of a youth employment strategy in view of the fact that this sector will be greatly affected by Covid-19 and that the unemployment rate in 2019 for those under 35 years of age has still not recovered fully. [15860/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Government policy to reduce youth unemployment is twofold:

- to create an environment in which business can succeed and create jobs; and
- to ensure that as many of these new jobs and other vacancies that arise in our economy are filled by people taken from the Live Register, including young people.

Providing education and employment opportunities to young jobseekers forms a central tenet of my Department's Pathways to Work strategy and has been effective in reducing youth unemployment from a peak of over 30 percent in 2012 to a rate of 9.3 percent in the fourth quarter of 2019. Moreover, Ireland's youth unemployment rate has been significantly lower than the EU27 rate for a number of years now; which highlights the progress that had been made in Ireland's labour market recovery in recent years.

However, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting labour market conditions, the CSO estimated youth unemployment to be at 12.8 percent for June, with the COVID-adjusted rate at just over 45 percent. This COVID-adjusted rate is considered to be the upper bound, as all claimants of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment who are not already included on the Live Register are classified as unemployed.

My Department recently published a Working Paper entitled 'The Initial Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Ireland's Labour Market', which highlights that those who have lost their jobs in the sectors most severely impacted as a result of the pandemic and the associated containment measures are more likely to be younger than the overall population. This disproportionate impact is driven by the high levels of young people in employment in the most affected sectors, namely 'accommodation and food' and 'wholesale and retail trade'.

While planning for economic recovery it is crucial that we provide young people with holistic supports to assist them back to work and support new young entrants to compete for job vacancies in a competitive labour market. We must also not forget our disadvantaged youths who were unemployed prior to the Pandemic and face significant barriers to work.

Building and enhancing the skills of the workforce will be an important element of economic recovery; having regard to the skills currently in demand and those likely to be in demand by employers in the future. SOLAS are working in partnership with officials in my Department to develop an agile response which brings together and builds on existing further education and training expertise and resources to provide the recently unemployed cohort with the 'Skills to Compete' in the labour market. This activation initiative will support young people to develop their transversal skills and increase employability; build digital competency so as to flourish in the changing world of work; and participate in specific training targeting growth sectors and occupations.

Intreo, the public employment service which provides job search and activation supports will maintain a close relationship with SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) at a national and local level to identify appropriate opportunities for referral to re-skilling and upskilling opportunities for young jobseekers.

The Labour Market Advisory Council was convened by my predecessor earlier this year to provide advice to Government on employment and labour market issues. The first task assigned to the Council was to develop, as a matter of urgency, proposals for actions to tackle the labour market challenges arising from the pandemic. This mandate has resulted in the publication of a Policy Paper 'Preparing for Economic Recovery' by the Council, which will assist the Government in developing the public policy responses required to support national economic recovery. Among its recommendations, the Council recognise:

- The potential for targeted wage subsidies to ease labour market entrance for young workers in particular.

- The need to enhance and expand existing work placement programmes such as the Youth Employment Support Scheme (YESS) to broader categories of jobseekers, including increasing the eligible age cohort to include those aged 25-29 years.

- The additional value to be gained by linking these programmes to upskilling and reskilling opportunities in enhancing the labour market prospects of young jobseekers.

Targeted policies to assist the labour market prospects and recovery for young jobseekers, will be a strong feature of the July stimulus package and the upcoming Pathways to Work 2020-2025 strategy, with strategy publication expected in Q3 2020.

Artists' Remuneration

698. Deputy Jennifer Whitmore asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the feasibility of a basic income for artists and performers will be examined; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15919/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Where an artist or performer has lost their employment as a consequence of the pandemic they may avail of the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment at this time.

The main social welfare schemes for unemployed people are the jobseeker's allowance and

jobseekers benefit schemes which provide income support for people who have lost work and are unable to find alternative full-time employment. A person must be fully unemployed for 4 days in 7 consecutive days to qualify for either scheme. They must also satisfy other conditions such as being available for and genuine seeking full time employment and in the case of jobseekers benefit entitlement a person must have sufficient PRSI contributions paid. If a person does not meet the contribution condition for jobseekers benefit they may be eligible for means tested jobseekers allowance. There is also the option of Jobseekers Benefit for the self-employed where the person has ceased trading.

The Professional Artist Scheme under jobseekers allowance, which was developed in consultation with the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, is a mechanism to assist self-employed artists who are temporarily in need of additional income support but wish to continue as a professional artist. The scheme acknowledges the status of self-employed artists in specified art forms and gives them a 12 month window to focus on building up their work before they became subject to labour market activation which is mandatory for most recipients of jobseekers payments.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to request the Low Pay Commission to examine Universal Basic Income, so any proposals on that issue will be addressed in that context.

State Pensions

699. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the increase in the pension age to 67 years of age has been deferred; the steps required to implement the policy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16100/20]

748. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the timeframe for enacting commitments in the programme for Government on deferring the increase in the pension age in 2021 and the introduction of a transition payment for persons having to retire at 65 years of age; when legislation will be published to give effect to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15381/20]

775. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to change the age at which persons are entitled to the old age pension; her plans to change the requirement for persons of 65 years of age and above who do not qualify for the old age pension to sign on; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15695/20]

785. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if new legislation will be required to ensure that State pensions are paid to those aged 66 years of age and over after 1 January 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15989/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 699, 748, 775 and 785 together.

The Social Welfare and Pensions Act, 2011 provides for increases to the State pension age to make the State pension system more sustainable as life expectancy increases. This began in January 2014 with the abolition of the State Pension (Transition). This measure standardised the State pension age for all at 66 years. The legislation provides for increases to the State pension age - to 67 in 2021 and further to 68 in 2028.

The new Programme for Government “Our Shared Future” states that the planned increase

in the State pension age next year will be deferred. This will require amendment to primary legislation and the Government will bring in the necessary legislation later this year.

Furthermore, a Commission on Pensions will be established to examine sustainability and eligibility issues in relation to State pensions and the Social Insurance Fund. The Commission is to report to Government by June 2021 on options including the qualifying age, contribution rates, total contributions and eligibility requirements. The Government will take action, having regard to the recommendations of the Commission, within six months. Pending the Commission's report and any subsequent Government decisions on its recommendations, it is intended that the State pension age will remain at 66 years as at present.

The Programme also proposes an "Early Retirement Allowance or Pension" for 65 year olds paid at the same rate as Jobseekers Benefit without a requirement to sign on, partake in any activation measures or be available for and genuinely seeking work. The new allowance will be introduced as early as possible for those who are retired from employment. Officials in my Department are currently assessing the necessary legislation, ICT systems and administrative processes required for the introduction of this payment.

I hope this clarifies matters for the Deputies.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

700. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the age and county profile of those who have had their pandemic unemployment payment rate changed to €203 from €350. [14662/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): 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. Government has recently approved the extension of the payment up to 10th August and announced a two-level payment structure to link the payment to gross prior earnings. This change to the payment structure ensures that the rate is fair and targeted. The age and county details for those receiving a €203 Pandemic Unemployment Payment the week ending July 11th are detailed in the table below.

County	<25	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-59	60+
Carlow	362	213	295	249	103	109
Cavan	452	221	379	359	160	145
Clare	626	339	557	615	282	254
Cork	3357	1647	2183	2114	956	995
Donegal	1466	744	1007	998	382	367
Dublin	8410	7818	6636	5275	2163	2149
Galway	1501	890	1275	1232	512	510
Kerry	969	531	805	804	375	440
Kildare	1340	625	1004	853	352	345
Kilkenny	552	225	391	446	173	179
Laois	342	220	333	295	114	133
Leitrim	253	106	185	176	78	99
Limerick	1014	778	803	681	301	320
Longford	191	153	213	211	87	72
Louth	929	508	768	743	279	232

County	<25	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-59	60+
Mayo	891	376	594	600	320	336
Meath	1122	599	950	935	386	365
Monaghan	441	250	360	306	123	146
Offaly	402	230	313	299	143	124
Roscommon	390	177	293	345	148	162
Sligo	484	208	332	253	136	166
Tipperary	931	432	664	615	329	308
Waterford	792	386	556	498	210	238
Westmeath	562	290	412	397	178	178
Wexford	875	491	708	718	305	318
Wicklow	959	473	761	767	315	297
Unknown	78	106	87	58	44	28

Social Welfare Eligibility

701. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if an entitlement to a basic social welfare payment exists in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14720/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): According to the records of my Department, the person concerned submitted an application for a Basic Supplementary Welfare Allowance with effect from 6/4/2020. This application was disallowed on the basis that his income is in excess of the prescribed limit for his family size and that the excess income is deemed adequate to meet his needs. A decision letter dated 27/4/2020 issued to the person concerned advising him of his right to appeal the decision of the Deciding Officer to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO).

The person concerned also submitted an application for a State Pension (Contributory) with effect from 16/4/2020. Unfortunately he did not qualify as he did not satisfy the qualifying conditions. A qualifying condition for the State Pension (Contributory) is that a person must have at least 520 paid full rate social insurance contributions before their 66th birthday. A decision letter dated 16/4/2020 issued to the person concerned advising him of his right to appeal this decision to the SWAO.

It is open to the person concerned to submit an application for a State Pension (Non-Contributory). This is a means-tested payment where a person doesn't qualify for a contributory pension based on their social insurance (PRSI) contribution record or if they only qualify for a reduced rate of State Pension. Entitlement to State Pension (Non-Contributory) is subject to a means test. Items which count as means include cash income, including foreign pensions, the value of any property (excluding a person's own home) and the value of any savings and investments which a person or their spouse, civil partner or cohabitant may have. In order to qualify for the State Pension (Non-Contributory) a person must be habitually resident in the State.

According to the records of my Department there is no record of a Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment application in respect of the person concerned. However as the person concerned is 66 years of age, he does not meet the eligibility criteria for receipt of this income support.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Questions - Written Answers
Rent Supplement Scheme

702. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if rent allowance has been increased in line with current rent in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14725/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): According to the records of my Department, the rent supplement claim for the person concerned was reviewed on 28/11/19. Following completion of this review, his monthly Rent Supplement payment was increased to €370 per month. The person concerned has not made a further request for an increase in Rent Supplement since this last review.

In order to continue to be eligible for Rent Supplement, the person concerned must provide evidence to the Department that he is on the housing list with Kildare County Council. Letters requesting this information were sent to the person concerned on 6/11/2019 and 3/12/2019.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

703. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when arrears and back payments will be issued to pandemic unemployment payment claimants; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14753/20]

710. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding Covid-19 payments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14824/20]

757. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of persons due arrears of the pandemic unemployment payment; when these arrears payments will be made; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15426/20]

788. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when backdated payments will be made to those in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment who missed some payments at the beginning of the scheme due to mistakes in their applications. [16017/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 703, 710, 757 and 788 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. Over 1 million applications in respect of 743,000 individuals have been received. To date, almost 7.8 million payments have issued at a cost of over €2.7 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 com-

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plex, 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. The Department is currently developing an automated process which will examine each case and match a person's eligibility for each week of the scheme against their payment history. This is a complex piece of work. I am advised that the figures requested by the Deputy are not available at this time.

It will take time to complete the necessary development work to enable the review cases and determine what, if any, arrears are due. I can assure the Deputies that all cases will be examined and where arrears arise they will be processed and claimants will be notified.

In cases where a person supplied incorrect bank details as part of their application for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment they were contacted by my Department and advised that the bank details submitted by them were incorrect. They were asked to submit a new claim for the payment and provide the correct bank IBAN details in order for their claim to be processed. Payments which failed due to incorrect IBAN details will be reissued as part of the arrears processing work outlined above.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputies.

Social Welfare Overpayments

704. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if this question will be accepted as notice of the appeal against the decision to seek recovery of an alleged overpayment in the case of a person (details supplied) on the basis that the applicant did not fully understand the significance of her response to the questions regarding eligibility of payment; if an oral hearing can be arranged at an early date in respect of this case; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14754/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned has not been received by that office. However, on foot of the Deputy's question, a form has been forwarded to the person concerned requesting her to state the grounds for her appeal of the Department's decision. On receipt of her reply the appeal will be opened, processed in the normal manner and referred to an Appeals Officer for consideration.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office has also advised me as result of the current Covid-19 restrictions and in order to safeguard the health and safety of both appellants and staff the Social Welfare Appeals Office has not held any oral appeal hearings since 13 March 2020. No such hearings can be scheduled until further notice. The matter is being kept under review. Appeals are currently being determined on the basis of written submissions. In some cases it has also been possible for Appeals Officers to progress appeals by way of telephone calls and email on issues relating to an appeal (which might otherwise have been ascertained in the course of an oral hearing) and bring the matter to a conclusion.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

705. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her views on matters raised in correspondence by an association (details supplied) in respect of the pandemic unemployment payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14755/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I can confirm that where a person is not satisfied with a decision to withdraw their pandemic unemployment payment, they can have this decision reviewed. If the Deputy can supply the details of the individuals in question I will arrange for their individual cases to be reviewed.

I trust that this clarifies the position.

Proposed Legislation

706. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to introduce legislation to deal with situations in which companies or others engage in asset stripping of a firm in order to avoid their responsibility to their workforces, as in a case (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14769/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Company law matters are the responsibility of the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

As I understand it, the Companies Act 2014 already includes provisions which may be utilised by liquidators or creditors of an insolvent company in appropriate cases. These include section 608, regarding the power of a court to order return of assets which have been improperly transferred; and section 599 where a related company may be required to contribute to debts of a company being wound up.

A range of factors will be involved for liquidators or creditors in deciding whether to pursue litigation based on these provisions of the Companies Act 2014. Such statutory provisions and the associated civil and criminal penalties also provide an important deterrent effect.

Alongside Company Law, companies must also of course comply with other legal requirements including their obligations in respect of the treatment of their employees, creditors and disclosure to and compliance with Revenue requirements.

Notwithstanding the above, the Programme for Government commits to:

- Reviewing the Companies Acts, with a view to addressing the practice of trading entities splitting their operations between trading and property, with the result that the trading business (including the jobs) goes into solvency and the assets are taken out of the original business; and

- Examining the legal provision that pertains to any sale to a connected party, following the insolvency of a company, including the matter of who can object and the allowable grounds of an objection.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Company Liquidations

707. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will meet workers of a company (details supplied); the steps she will take to ensure that stock or assets are not removed from the company's stores before the outcome of negotiations with workers' representatives on redundancy terms and possible future scenarios; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14770/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I note that Debenhams is a court-supervised liquidation, subject to the oversight of the High Court, and accordingly is sub judice. While company law matters are the responsibility of the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, there is in fact no ministerial power to intervene in a court-supervised liquidation.

In general terms, the Companies Act 2014 already includes provisions which may be utilised by liquidators or creditors of an insolvent company in appropriate cases. These include section 608, regarding the power of a court to order the return of assets which have been improperly transferred, and section 599 where a related company may be required to contribute to debts of company being wound up. A range of factors will be involved for liquidators or creditors in deciding whether to pursue litigation based on these provisions of the Companies Act 2014. Such statutory provisions and the associated civil and criminal penalties also provide an important deterrent effect.

Alongside Company Law, companies must also of course comply with other legal requirements including their obligations in respect of the treatment of their employees, creditors and disclosure to and compliance with Revenue requirements.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

JobPath Programme

708. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans for the JobPath scheme; when current contracts with providers Turas Nua and Seetec will expire; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14772/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): In 2019, my Department activated extension provisions within the existing contracts of both JobPath providers that enable referrals to the JobPath service until the end of 2020.

Normal labour activation services were suspended in recent months in accordance with public health guidelines, although engagement with clients continued by phone where possible. However, in parallel with the Intreo service, our contracted public employment services, including JobPath and the Local Employment Services, have resumed activation for new referrals. It is vital to continue to engage with the long term unemployed and other cohorts to ensure they do not become further distant from the labour market. This will be undertaken with due regard to public health requirements.

In common with all contracted public employment services, my Department is examining all options for the provision of services in 2021 with due regard to the significant labour market impacts of Covid-19 and the associated restrictions.

My Department engaged external consultants in late 2019 to review all current contracted public employment services, including JobPath. Their report, currently being finalised, will inform the Government's decision on the future structure of all contracted public employment services. It is essential that we ensure our labour market activation services are fit-for-purpose

and provide value for money. This must be balanced against the pressing need to ensure that these key services are in situ when needed by those who have lost their jobs arising from the economic impact of the pandemic.

Ministerial Responsibilities

709. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will provide a copy of the departmental briefings received by her and each Minister of State in her Department upon their taking up each individual role; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14802/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): On my first day as Minister, I received a comprehensive briefing document on the many policy areas for which I am responsible in this Department. As has been the policy of the Department, it is intended that the briefing material will be published in the coming weeks.

Question No. 710 answered with Question No. 703.

Labour Court

711. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of Labour Court recommendations made that relate to Departments; the number of these that have been implemented; and the number outstanding. [14836/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Labour Court recommendations that relate to my Department are usually dealt with and recorded on a divisional rather than central basis. As a result, it has not been possible within the timeframe allowed to collate with absolute accuracy the information the Deputy is seeking in respect of my own Department. This is underway and will be sent directly to the Deputy when it becomes fully available. My officials may also seek clarification from the Deputy on the time period for which he seeks the information.

My Department would not have any information relating to Labour Court recommendations for other Departments. Further such information may be available from the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, as the Labour Court comes under the remit of his Department. Alternatively, such information may be available from the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform given its coordinating role for Departments generally.

I hope this clarifies the matter to some extent for the Deputy.

State Pensions

712. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of pension arrears owed to a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14852/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): This case was reviewed and, having regard to all the circumstances, the person's pension has been awarded from their 66th birthday. Arrears will issue shortly.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

State Pensions

713. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the provisions in place to ensure that those who have lost out due to the change in pension rate bands in 2012 will be given funds owed to them. [14923/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The then Government introduced a new initiative in 2018 called the Interim Total Contributions Approach (Interim TCA) in response to concerns raised about rate-band changes in 2012.

This initiative included provision for a new HomeCaring Periods Scheme which fundamentally changed the entitlement of many who spent time out of the workforce caring for others. It, for the first time, acknowledged home caring periods prior to 1994 and provides for up to 20 years of HomeCaring periods to be considered. As a result, those who have a 40 year record of paid and credited social insurance contributions, subject to a maximum of 20 years of credits / HomeCaring periods, qualify for a maximum contributory pension where they satisfy the other qualifying conditions for the scheme. Arising from this initiative, the Department reviewed over 94,000 cases resulting in over 38,000 receiving an increased pension payment. Since April 2019 all new State Pension (Contributory) applications are assessed under all possible rate calculation methods, including the Interim TCA, with the most beneficial rate paid to the pensioner.

It should be noted if a person does not satisfy those conditions, they may qualify for the means-tested State Pension (Non-Contributory), the maximum rate of which is over 95% that of the maximum rate of the State Pension (Contributory). Alternatively, if their spouse is a State pensioner and they have significant household means, their most beneficial payment may be an Increase for a Qualified Adult, based on their personal means, and amounting up to 90% of a full contributory pension.

The new Programme for Government “Our Shared Future” includes a commitment to introduce a Total Contributions Approach (TCA). This 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. Furthermore, the Programme commits to the establishment of a new Commission on Pensions to examine sustainability and eligibility issues in relation to State pensions and the Social Insurance Fund. The Commission is to report to Government by June 2021 on a range of matters including total contributions and eligibility requirements.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

714. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she has instructed her officials to contact those persons directly in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment to inform them of the need to re-register their eligibility for the payment. [14941/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department recently made contact and had engaged in a publicity campaign with recipients of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and requested that they confirm their continued eligi-

bility to receive the payment. This is in line with the standard practice applying to all jobseeker payments. Recipients were asked to do this no later than Monday, 13 July. Failure to do so may affect their entitlement to continue to receive a payment. While that deadline has now passed, the Department will still accept declarations up to Monday 20 July.

To do so, recipients should use the online portal www.MyWelfare.ie and follow the instructions under the heading 'continue eligibility to receive Pandemic Unemployment Payment'. This is the simplest and easiest way to do so. Any person who experiences difficulty in doing this should contact the helpline 1890 800 024 (Monday to Friday from 9.00am to 5.00pm).

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Carer's Support Grant

715. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when a respite payment will be made to a person (details supplied); if the amount will be paid in full; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14949/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Carer's allowance (CA) is a means-tested social assistance payment made to a person who is habitually resident in the State and who is providing full-time care and attention to a child or an adult who has such a disability that as a result they require that level of care.

The carer's support grant (CSG) is an annual payment for carers who look after a person in need of full-time care and attention. The payment is made regardless of the carer's means but is subject to the same caring conditions as CA.

CA recipients automatically qualify for the Carer's Support Grant, an annual payment of €1,700, which is not means-tested or taxed, on the first Thursday in June each year where they have an entitlement to CA.

The person concerned is in receipt of CA for two care recipients. CSG did not issue for his late son who passed away on 3 May 2020.

The person concerned will receive a payment of CA for his late son up until 29 July 2020. This includes the 12 weeks after death payment.

The CSG payment will issue to the nominated bank account of the person concerned on 17 July 2020.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 716 answered with Question No. 696.

Rent Supplement Scheme

717. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if rent support can be made available in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14972/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): According to the records of my Department, no application for a Rent Supplement has been received from the person concerned. It is standard procedure where a person is residing in a HAP

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designated area and is on a Local Authority housing list, that the person in the first instance makes an application to their Local Authority for a Housing Assistance Payment (HAP).

I trust this clarifies the matter.

State Pension (Contributory)

718. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the extent to which an entitlement to a contributory State pension exists or can be facilitated in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14974/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The person concerned reached pension age on 13 July 2015. They applied for State pension (contributory) on 27 July 2015. The person has a contribution record of 226 paid full-rate social insurance contributions. As their contributions fall short of the required 520 paid full-rate contributions to qualify for standard State pension (contributory), their claim was disallowed. They were notified in writing of this decision on 7 August 2015, and provided with a copy of their social insurance record on which the decision was based.

A new application was submitted by the person concerned on 30 September 2019. While the person has paid self-employment (Class S) contributions, they have not paid any self-employment contributions before age 66. Under social welfare legislation, a self-employed contributor will not be regarded as satisfying the contribution conditions for State pension (contributory) unless the person has paid self-employment contributions in respect of at least one year prior to reaching age 66 and all self-employment contributions payable have been paid.

The application was disallowed on 19 November 2019, with an explanation to the person concerned that under legislation their self-employment contributions for the period from 2006 – 2014 could not be used in the calculation of their pension (contributory) entitlement. They requested a review of their entitlement on 13 December 2019 but were informed on 11 March 2020 that the outcome remained the same. An application form for the means-tested residency-based State pension (non-contributory) was enclosed with the letter of 11 March 2020.

The person concerned appealed their pension decision to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office. My Department's submission and papers on the case were referred to that Office on 18 June 2020. An Appeals Officer will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented or, if required and if possible in the context of the Covid-19 restrictions, will hold an oral appeal hearing. The person will be notified in writing of the Appeals Officer's decision.

It remains open to the person concerned to apply for State pension (non-contributory). On receipt of a completed application form, their eligibility for this pension can be determined and they will be notified in writing of the decision.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Carer's Allowance

719. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of an appeal by a person (details supplied) in respect of a decision on a carer's allowance application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14988/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Carer's allowance (CA) is a means-tested social assistance payment made to a person who is habitually resident in the State and who is providing full-time care and attention to a child or an adult who has such a disability that as a result they require that level of care.

An application for CA was received from the person concerned on 14 November 2019.

It is a condition for receipt of a CA that the person being cared for must have such disability that they require full-time care and attention.

This is defined as requiring from another person, continual supervision and frequent assistance throughout the day in connection with normal bodily functions or continual supervision in order to avoid danger to him or herself and likely to require that level of care for at least twelve months.

The evidence submitted in support of this application was examined and the deciding officer decided that this evidence did not indicate that the requirement for full-time care was satisfied in respect of the care recipient.

The person concerned was notified on 8 January 2020 of this decision, the reason for it and of his right of review and appeal.

The person concerned requested an appeal of this decision and provided further supporting medical evidence to support his appeal.

A review took place before the application was sent for appeal and the application was awarded to the person concerned on 26 May 2020 with effect from 14 November 2019. The first payment issued to his nominated bank account on 4 June 2020.

Arrears due from 14 November 2019 to 27 May 2020 issued to the nominated bank account on 4 June 2020.

The person concerned was notified on 26 May 2020 of this decision, the reason for it and of his right of review and appeal.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Overpayments

720. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the amount in illness benefit overpayments recouped in each of the years 2010 to 2019, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14989/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Overpayments of social welfare assistance and benefit payments mainly arise as a consequence of decisions made under the relevant sections of the Social Welfare (Consolidation) Act, 2005 (as amended). Where an overpayment is raised, the Department is obligated to make every effort to recover sums overpaid in full in the shortest time period.

In relation to the information sought by the Deputy, it is important to note that the Department introduced a new integrated overpayments recording and debt management IT system in late 2014. The system's improved functionality has provided enhanced control, reconciliation and audit procedures in relation to debt transactions.

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Therefore, a breakdown of Illness Benefit overpayments recoveries for the period 2015 (following the introduction of the new system referred to above) to 2019 - are set out in the table below. Information in relation to earlier years is not readily available.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Illness Benefit Recoveries 2015-2019

Year	Recoveries
2015	€3.12m
2016	€2.75m
2017	€2.33m
2018	€2.38m
2019	€3.58m

Social Welfare Appeals

721. **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. [14991/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that an Appeals Officer, having fully considered all the evidence, disallowed the appeal of the person concerned by way of summary decision on 12 February 2020.

Under social welfare legislation the decision of an Appeals Officer is final and conclusive and may only be reviewed by an Appeals Officer in the light of new evidence or new facts. I am advised that the person concerned subsequently submitted additional evidence and that the Appeals Officer agreed to review the appeal decision on foot of this additional evidence. However, the Appeals Officer did not find any new facts or fresh evidence which warranted a revision of their decision. The person concerned was notified of the outcome of the review on 3 July 2020.

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 on social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Carer's Allowance

722. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of a carer's allowance application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14993/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered in that office on 14 April 2020. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant papers and comments by or on behalf of the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. These papers were received in the Social Welfare Appeals Office on 12 May 2020.

The Appeals Officer to whom the appeal was referred has engaged in correspondence with

the person concerned in relation to their case. The Appeals Officer is now in a position to make a summary decision on the appeal in the near future.

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.

State Pension (Contributory)

723. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the position regarding the planned State pension (contributory) age increase to 67 years of age in January 2021 and 68 years of age in January 2028; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15010/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Social Welfare and Pensions Act, 2011 provided for increases to the State pension age to make the State pension system more sustainable as life expectancy increases. This began in January 2014 with the abolition of the State Pension (Transition). This measure standardised the State pension age for all at 66 years. The legislation provides for increases to the State pension age - to 67 in 2021 and further to 68 in 2028.

The new Programme for Government “Our Shared Future” states that the planned increase in the State pension age next year will be deferred. This will require amendment to primary legislation.

Furthermore, a Commission on Pensions will be established to examine sustainability and eligibility issues in relation to State pensions and the Social Insurance Fund. The Commission is to report to Government by June 2021 on options including the qualifying age, contribution rates, total contributions and eligibility requirements. The Government will take action, having regard to the recommendations of the Commission, within six months. Pending the Commission’s report and any subsequent Government decisions on its recommendations, it is intended that the State pension age will remain at 66 years.

The Programme also proposes an “Early Retirement Allowance or Pension” for 65 year olds paid at the same rate as Jobseekers Benefit without a requirement to sign on, partake in any activation measures or be available for and genuinely seeking work.

I hope this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

724. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if persons over 66 years of age who apply for the Covid-19 payment may have their cases judged on their individual circumstances; the process of dealing with applications from persons over 66 years of age; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15012/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): 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 who have become fully unemployed due to the pandemic. This emergency payment is payable to

people between the ages of 18 up to 66 which is consistent with the other Social Protection job-seeker schemes. It is paid to people who, in most cases, have no other source of income.

People over 66 are eligible for and can apply for a State Pension. Those over 66 do not pay social insurance contributions and can, if in receipt of the State Contributory Pension retain all of their State pension as well as their employment income and retain that pension payment if they lose employment income. People in receipt of the non-contributory or means tested pension who are also in receipt of an employment income may have their pension payment increased if they lose that employment income or if that employment income is reduced.

Recipients of State pension payments may, depending on their individual circumstances, have access to a range of other income supports not available to unemployed people – including the free fuel allowance, the living alone allowance, the household benefits package (gas./electricity), the telephone support allowance, free travel and the free TV licence.

Where a person is experiencing financial hardship they can apply for assistance through the means tested Supplementary Welfare Allowance. Queries in relation to eligibility should be made by phone to their local Intreo Centre or Branch Office.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

725. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of applications received for the pandemic unemployment payment from persons over 66 years of age; the number of Covid-19 payments made to persons over 66 years of age; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15013/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am advised that 4,849 people aged 66 or older have submitted an application for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment. The Pandemic Unemployment Payment is available to people aged 18 up to 66 years, and is consistent with other jobseeker and social protection income supports paid to working age persons. People aged 66 years and over may not avail of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, but are provided for within the Social Protection income support framework through the State Pension, either the State Pension Contributory or the State Pension Non-Contributory.

Persons in receipt of the means-tested State Pension Non-Contributory who are also in receipt of an employment income may have their pension payment increased if they lose that employment income or if that employment income is reduced. Similarly if a person aged over 66 who did not previously qualify or make an application for a means-tested pension may qualify for a pension payment if their circumstances change – including if they lose any employment income or if that employment income is reduced.

A person of any age who is experiencing financial hardship can access assistance under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme including Exceptional and Urgent Needs Payments where the need is demonstrated.

Disability Allowance

726. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of a disability allowance appeal by a person

(details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15020/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):

An application for disability allowance (DA) from the person concerned was disallowed on medical grounds and because they failed to supply information which was requested by this Department. Notification of this decision and the reason(s) for it issued to the person on 3 June 2020.

A further review of this decision was carried out on 7 July 2020. The original decision was confirmed and the customer was notified of this.

The person in question has lodged an appeal with the independent social welfare appeals office (SWAO). All the relevant papers requested by that office were submitted by the Department on 8 July 2020. The SWAO will be in touch with the person in due course in relation to the progress of the appeal.

The person concerned is currently in receipt of basic supplementary welfare allowance (SWA) and on 3 July 2020 was issued with a cheque for arrears of allowance due from 28 May 2020.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 727 answered with Question No. 688.

Question No. 728 answered with Question No. 690.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

729. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if workers who are receiving 30% of their wages and are on the temporary wage subsidy scheme are entitled to apply for the short-time working payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15142/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):

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, so that employers can retain links with employees for when business picks up after the crisis.

The short time work support is a social insurance contribution based income support available to full time employees who have had the number of their days of employment reduced on a temporary and systematic basis due to a reduction in business, including following the effects of the Pandemic. If the employer has had to reduce working days due to the pandemic then the employee may be entitled to apply for short time work support provided that the employer does not receive the Temporary Wage Subsidy in respect of the days that the person is not working. However, each claim must be decided on a case by case basis taking into account the information provided by the employee and employer. A jobseeker's casual payment may be appropriate if the conditions for short term work support are not met.

I trust this clarifies the position.

Back to Education Allowance

730. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if Covid-19 payments will be considered as eligible payments to proceed to back to education allowance. [15146/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The back to education allowance (BTEA) provides income support for jobseekers and others in receipt of certain social welfare payments that pursue courses of education at second or third level. The main focus of the BTEA is to assist qualifying applicants to improve their educational qualifications and improve their prospects of gaining employment.

It is expected that, during the course of the roadmap to recovery, as many people as possible in receipt of the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment will return to employment prior to the commencement of the 2020/21 academic year. At the point of commencement of a new course of education a person in receipt of this payment will be required to establish an entitlement to a jobseekers payment to qualify for the BTEA.

A potential BTEA customer will not be adversely affected by time spent in receipt of the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment when it comes to calculating the qualifying period for BTEA.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Question No. 731 answered with Question No. 688.

Registration of Deaths

732. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when the provisions under the Civil Registration (Amendment) Act 2014 to provide for registration of deaths of Irish citizens who die abroad will be commenced; the reason for the six-year delay on this; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15177/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The establishment of a record of deaths abroad is legislated for under section 13 of the Civil Registration Amendment Act 2014, which inserts a new part 5A into the Civil Registration Act 2004 to provide for this.

Implementation of Part 5A, and other provisions of the 2014 Act, have been delayed for a considerable time due to ongoing industrial relations discussions between staff of the Civil Registration Service, who are employees of the Health Service Executive, and HSE management, who are responsible for operating the civil registration service locally. I am satisfied that sufficient progress has been made on resolving the issues in question. I am informed by the General Register Office that the administrative processes necessary for establishing the record of deaths abroad are in place and, accordingly, I can advise the Deputy that it is my intention to commence Part 5A on 1 September 2020.

Community Employment Schemes

733. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to provide pensions for community employment supervisors as recommended by the Workplace Relations Commission some years ago; the reason for the delay in resolving this issue; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15183/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):

As you are aware, Community Employment (CE) supervisors and assistant supervisors have been seeking for several years, through their union representatives, the allocation of Exchequer funding to implement a 2008 Labour Court recommendation relating to the provision of a pension scheme.

CE sponsoring authorities are the legal employers of their CE supervisors, CE assistant supervisors and CE participants, the Department's role continues to be that of CE funder.

The Labour Court recommendation was the subject of an extensive discussion at the Community Sector High-level Forum, chaired by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER). Its role was to examine certain issues pertaining to the Community Employment sector and in particular the subject of pensions, having regard to both the costs and precedent in the context of the wider community and voluntary sector. The High-level Forum included representatives from public service management and union officials.

A detailed scoping exercise was undertaken in 2017 with input from the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) on the potential costs of providing Exchequer support for the establishment of such a pension scheme for employees across the Community and Voluntary sector in Ireland. The potential cost to the State was estimated at between €188 million and €347 million per annum depending on the numbers involved.

Officials from my Department met with the unions thereafter to establish a process for related discussions and to agree on the terms of reference. During the meetings that followed, the parties undertook a detailed analysis of a number of potential solutions tabled, mindful of the broader environment in which any solution found would need to operate.

Related discussions also took place between officials from my Department and their counterparts in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER).

Question No. 734 answered with Question No. 690.

Social Welfare Benefits

735. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if the criteria and level of payout for family carers might be revised in view of the hours such persons work and the billions of euro per year these persons save the State. [15210/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):

The Government acknowledges the crucial role that family carers play and is fully committed to supporting carers in that role. This commitment is recognised in both the Programme for Government and the National Carers' Strategy.

The main income supports to carers provided by my Department are Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit, Domiciliary Care Allowance and the Carer's Support Grant. Combined spending on these payments to carers in 2020 is expected to exceed €1.3 billion.

The Carer's Allowance is the main scheme by which my Department provides income support to carers in the community. Carer's Allowance is a means tested social assistance payment awarded to those carers who are caring for certain people who require full-time care and attention. The primary objective of the payment is to provide an income support to carers whose earning capacity is substantially reduced as a consequence of their caring responsibilities and in so doing to support the ongoing care of the person in respect of whom care is being provided. In

doing this it also contributes to recognising the valuable role of carers and helping to maintain people with caring needs in their own homes and communities.

The means test for Carer's Allowance is one of the most generous means tests in the social welfare system, most notably with regard to spouse's earnings. The amount of weekly earnings disregarded is €332.50 per week for a single person and €665 per week for a couple. This means that a couple with two children can earn in the region of €37,500 and qualify for the maximum rate of Carer's Allowance. A half-rate carer's allowance is also payable with other social welfare payments e.g. pensions and disability payments. Where carers are providing care to more than one person, an increase of 50% is applicable. Carers may also (subject to certain conditions) qualify for the:

- Household Benefits Package
- Free Travel Scheme

The conditions attached to payments of Carer's Allowance are consistent with the overall conditions that apply to social assistance payments generally. This system of social assistance supports provides payments based on an income need with the means test playing the critical role in determining whether or not an income need arises as a consequence of a particular contingency – be that illness, disability, unemployment or caring. Carer's Allowance acts as an income support for those who cannot earn an income in the open labour market due to their caring responsibilities. The continued application of the means test not only ensures that the recipient has a verifiable income need but that resources are targeted to those with greatest need.

Furthermore, as part of Budget measures 2020 the number of hours that a carer can engage in employment (or education or training) outside the home was increased from 15 hours to 18.5 hours.

Other available supports to family carers (that are not means-tested) include:-

Carer's Support Grant: The Carer's Support Grant is paid automatically to people in receipt of Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit or Domiciliary Care Allowance. Other people who are not in receipt of a social welfare payment but who are providing full time care and attention are also eligible and can apply for a grant. The Carer's Support Grant is an annual payment of €1,700 a year for each care recipient paid in a single lump sum with no requirement to satisfy a means test. Some 114,000 carers received the annual Carer's Support Grant on Thursday 4 June, 2020. The estimated expenditure on the Carer's Support Grant this year is €237.32 million.

Domiciliary Care Allowance: Domiciliary Care Allowance is a monthly payment for a child aged under 16 with a severe disability, who requires ongoing care and attention, substantially over and above the care and attention usually required by a child of the same age. It is not means tested. The Domiciliary Care Allowance rate is €309.50 per month. There is no restriction on the number of children for whom a person may claim Domiciliary Care Allowance. In other words, a person caring for more than one child who qualifies for Domiciliary Care Allowance may claim the monthly allowance for each child.

I can assure the Deputy that I am very aware of the commitment and the key role carers play in society and I will keep the range of supports available to family carers under review. While I will seek to improve the supports available for carers, any changes must be considered in an overall budgetary context.

Social Welfare Appeals

736. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when oral hearings as part of social welfare appeals will resume; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15235/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): 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 Social Welfare Appeals Office has not held any oral appeal hearings since 13 March 2020. No such hearings can be scheduled until further notice. The matter is being kept under review.

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. The Appeals Office is also exploring the use of video technology for appeal hearings. Among the issues being considered are what is the most appropriate technological solution and the types of appeal cases that would be potentially suitable for this approach.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Employment Affairs & Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions on social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 737 answered with Question No. 690.

Carer's Allowance

738. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of a carer's allowance application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15247/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Carer's allowance (CA) is a means-tested social assistance payment made to a person who is habitually resident in the State and who is providing full-time care and attention to a child or an adult who has such a disability that as a result they require that level of care.

Two applications for CA were received from the person concerned on 22 April 2020 in respect of both his parents.

Additional information in relation to the person's application was requested by a deciding officer on 11 June 2020.

The accountant of the person concerned contacted the Department on 1 July 2020 requesting more time to return the requested information.

Once the information is received the application will be processed without delay and the person concerned will be notified directly of the outcome.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 739 answered with Question No. 690.

Social Welfare Payments Administration

740. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when social welfare payments will revert back to weekly payments as opposed to fortnightly payments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15262/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): 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 Parent's Benefit, which are paid exclusively into a customer's bank account by Electronic Fund Transfer, have reverted to a weekly payment pattern. The situation in relation to the reversion of other schemes - which are paid in post offices as well as by EFT - back to weekly payments is being kept under regular review.

Disability Allowance

741. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason a deduction is being made from the disability allowance payment of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15286/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Following a successful appeal to the independent social welfare appeals office (SWAO), the person concerned was awarded a reduced amount of disability allowance (DA) with effect from 30 January 2019.

DA is a means-tested payment. Means were assessed from the employment of the person concerned. On 4 September 2019 following a review, this lady was awarded an increased rate of DA as her earnings had decreased and arrears of allowance due issued to her.

A further review was carried out on 1 November 2019 and the person concerned was notified that her rate of DA remained unchanged. She was also notified of her right to seek a review of this decision or appeal directly to the Social Welfare Appeals Office.

The person concerned received child benefit for her daughter for a period when the child no longer resided with her. As a result, she was not entitled to payment for the period in question and a revised decision was made disallowing child benefit from August to October 2006.

This resulted in an overpayment of €450. The person concerned was notified of the decision and the overpayment amount in November 2006. This debt is no longer owing to the department and was fully recovered prior to the commencement of DA.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance Scheme

742. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if it is possible to facilitate families without Internet access to apply for back to school grants on hard copy applications. [15292/20]

749. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if concerns will be addressed relating to equity of access to the back to school allowance (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15405/20]

768. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will facilitate a paper application form for the back to school allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15573/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 742, 749 and 768 together.

The back to school clothing and footwear allowance (BSCFA) scheme provides a once-off payment to eligible families to assist with the costs of clothing and footwear when children start or return to school each autumn. The scheme operates from June to September each year.

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.

Similar to previous years, the majority of customers are awarded BSCFA automatically and notification of these awards have issued to these customers.

Form 6 July, if customers have not received an award letter from BSCFA, the customer will need to apply for the allowance online on www.mywelfare.ie. If customers are experiencing issues applying online, they can contact the BSCFA section on 071 9193318 or 0818 11 11 13, where an officer can assist the customer to apply online or will issue an application form for the customer to complete.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Fuel Allowance

743. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if persons (details supplied) are entitled to fuel allowance or other benefits. [15314/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Fuel allowance is a means-tested payment to assist householders on long-term social welfare payments towards the cost of their heating needs. It is not intended to meet those costs in full. Only one allowance is paid per household.

The main eligibility conditions that apply to the fuel allowance scheme are that a person must be in receipt of a qualifying payment, must satisfy a means test and must either be living alone or with other qualifying persons. The fuel allowance means test is linked to the maximum rate of the state pension (contributory). The applicant and their spouse can have a combined weekly household income of €100.00 above the maximum rates for State pension (contributory) and Increase for qualified adult and still be eligible for a fuel allowance.

The person concerned applied for this allowance on 15 July 2019. At that time their spouse was in receipt of a non-qualifying payment and the fuel allowance application was disallowed.

14 July 2020

The person was notified in writing of this decision on 23 July 2019 and advised if there were any changes in their circumstances to submit a new application.

I have arranged for a fuel application form to issue to the person concerned. On receipt of the completed application their eligibility for this allowance will be re-examined and they will be notified in writing of the decision.

The person concerned is also in receipt of the Household Benefits Package which entitles them to an electricity allowance and free television licence.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Appeals

744. **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. [15345/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that an Appeals Officer, having fully considered all of the available evidence, decided to disallow the appeal of the person concerned by way of a summary decision on 21 May 2020. Under social welfare legislation the decision of an Appeals Officer is generally final and conclusive. However, it may be reviewed by an Appeals Officer in the light of new evidence or new facts which were not available to the Appeals Officer at the time of the making of their decision.

I am advised that the person concerned has submitted additional evidence and that the Appeals Officer has agreed to review the case. The person concerned will be contacted when the review of the appeal decision has been finalised.

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.

Domiciliary Care Allowance

745. **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. [15346/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): An application for Domiciliary Care Allowance was received from the person concerned on the 28th November 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 23rd March 2020 setting out the decision of the deciding officer to refuse the allowance.

An appeal was registered by the Social Welfare Appeals Office on the 22nd April 2020. As part of the appeals process the application was re-examined by a deciding officer and the person concerned was notified on the 4th June 2020 that the review was unsuccessful. An appeal submission was prepared and forwarded to the Social Welfare Appeals Office on the 2nd July

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.

Domiciliary Care Allowance

746. **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. [15347/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): An application for Domiciliary Care Allowance was received from the person concerned on the 28th August 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 6th 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 26th November 2019 and an appeal was subsequently registered by the Social Welfare Appeals Office on the 6th December 2019. As part of the appeals process the application was re-examined by a deciding officer and the person concerned was notified on the 31st January 2020 that the review was unsuccessful. An appeal submission was prepared and forwarded to the Social Welfare Appeals Office on the 3rd February 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.

Disability Allowance

747. **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. [15349/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The person concerned submitted an application for disability allowance (DA) on 17th October 2019. Their application, based upon all the evidence submitted, was refused on medical grounds as it was not found that this gentleman was substantially restricted in taking up employment. The person concerned was notified in writing of this decision on 11 December 2019.

An appeal was lodged with the independent social welfare appeals office (SWAO). On 19 May 2020 the SWAO notified us that the original decision was upheld and the appeal was disallowed. The person concerned was notified directly by the SWAO regarding their appeal.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 748 answered with Question No. 699.

Question No. 749 answered with Question No. 742.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

750. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of persons in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment each week since the scheme was introduced by age of the recipients; the number of students in receipt of the payment; her plans for the continued payment of the scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15410/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): 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 payment has been extended by the Government to August 10th and there is now a two-level payment structure which links the payment to gross prior earnings.

As we gradually move through the phases of reopening our society and the economy, we need to assess the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and see 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 assistance and also according to the evidence we receive from the reopening of the economy. Arrangements for supports paid after 10th August 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.

To Wednesday July 8th just under 6% of current PUP recipients have certified themselves as a full-time student either at second-level or third-level for the academic year 2019/2020.

Age breakdowns are published by my Department each Monday at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f4c60c-covid-19-statistics/> and by the Central Statistics Office each Friday at <https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/labourmarket/liveregister/detailedcovid-19incomesupport-andliveregistertables/>, and are also provided in the following table.

Week Ending	<25	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-59	60+	Total
28-Mar-20	11006	17740	14881	9759	3148	2203	58737
04-Apr-20	62656	72191	67399	48848	17549	14486	283129
11-Apr-20	102785	120783	125200	94158	35235	29094	507255
18-Apr-20	109895	127914	133810	102928	39238	32854	546639
25-Apr-20	116515	135635	141722	110449	42587	36409	583317
02-May-20	117995	136489	143055	112182	43597	37658	590976
09-May-20	120474	138917	145352	114264	44504	38596	602107
16-May-20	118570	135234	141730	111948	43907	38249	589638
23-May-20	118295	133873	140018	110745	43598	38115	584644
30-May-20	117537	132650	138478	109637	43259	37849	579410
06-Jun-20	113348	124455	127644	101539	40171	35585	542742
13-Jun-20	109809	118894	120320	96300	38199	34110	517632
20-Jun-20	106878	114685	115062	92474	36654	32997	498750
27-Jun-20	100725	107830	107071	85568	33924	30760	465878
04-Jul-20	95676	101783	100437	80339	31925	28773	438933
11-Jul-20	90210	95431	93953	75695	30227	27343	412859

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

751. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of persons over 65 years of age in receipt of Covid-19 payments; and if she will

make a statement on the matter. [15411/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):
The Pandemic Unemployment Payment is available to people aged 18 up to 66 years, and is consistent with other jobseeker and social protection income supports paid to working age persons.

I am advised that of the 412,859 people who received a Pandemic Unemployment Payment on the week ending 11th July 2020 there were 4,026 recipients who were 65 years of age.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

752. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of applications received for Covid-19 payments from persons over 65 years of age; the number of successful applicants; if payments made in error to some persons have been identified; her plans to recoup same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15412/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):
There were 11,539 applications submitted for the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment from people aged 65 or older.

A total of 6,690 people aged 65 or older have received at least one Pandemic Unemployment Payment and of those 4,026 received a payment this week.

In cases where persons are found to be ineligible for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment my Department will contact the person concerned and seek to recoup the money paid. If a person considers that they have inadvertently applied for the payment they should stop their payment online at www.MyWelfare.ie under the Covid-19 payment section or by contacting the Department's Income Support Helpline at 1 890 800 024.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Questions Nos. 753 and 754 answered with Question No. 688.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

755. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the process involved and timeline for reapplying for the pandemic unemployment payment after a person comes off same to accept short-term employment for a day to several days; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15415/20]

765. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the process involved and the timeline for reapplying for a pandemic unemployment payment in cases in which a person comes off the payment to avail of short-term employment for a day or several days in an arts production or similar. [15529/20]

773. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the process involved and timeline for reapplying for the pandemic unemployment payment after a person came off it to accept short-term employment of a day or several days. [15619/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):
I propose to take Questions Nos. 755, 765 and 773 together.

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Where a person closes their Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment in order to take up short-term employment and if that employment ceases as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic they may reapply for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment by using the online facility at www.mywelfare.ie. Currently, there are no backlogs in the processing of claims for the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

However, if their short term employment ended for reasons other than the Covid-19 pandemic they should apply for a jobseeker's payment by using the online facility at www.mywelfare.ie or by post to their nearest Intreo Centre or Branch Office.

A claim for a Pandemic Unemployment Payment or a Jobseeker's payment should be made as soon as a person becomes unemployed.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputies.

Question No. 756 answered with Question No. 688.

Question No. 757 answered with Question No. 703.

School Meals Programme

758. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason the delivery of the school meals programme for a school (details supplied) cannot be delivered during the summer months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15434/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The school meals programme provides funding towards the provision of food to some 1,580 schools and organisations benefitting 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.

The operation and administration of the scheme is the responsibility of the school; this includes the delivery model, choice of supplier to be used and food items to be provided. The scheme can be delivered in a variety of ways and depends on the needs, capabilities and resources, including infrastructure, of the schools or groups.

Following the announcement of the closure of schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic 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 to provide food until the end of the current school year - the end of May 2020 for post-primary schools and the end of June 2020 for primary schools, in line with the parameters of the school meals scheme. This funding was further extended to allow schools who choose to continue to provide food during the summer period until the start of the new academic year 2020/2021.

Any schools who wish to avail of additional funding to cover the provision of meals in July and August should contact the school meals section at school.meals@welfare.ie and funding will be reviewed on a case by case basis.

I trust that this clarifies the position.

Question No. 759 answered with Question No. 688.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

760. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection his plans and guidelines in place to help employers get their staff back to work; if there is an option to bring staff back on a two- or three-day week while they remain on the pandemic unemployment payment; if there are guidelines for businesses to assist them; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15519/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): With Phase 3 of Re-opening Ireland Roadmap underway, an increasing number of businesses are reopening. Last week, some 63,000 people closed their claim for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment of which 54,300 reported that they were returning to work. This is the highest number returning to work in a single week since the crisis began.

One of the conditions for receipt of the emergency payment is that the person must have lost their employment as a consequence of the pandemic and they are not being paid by their employer. Where a person is returning to work even on a reduced working week they must close their claim for the pandemic unemployment payment. Alternative supports may be available to them under the jobseeker's schemes depending on the individual circumstances. Further information on the supports available is provided at www.gov.ie.

The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme is available to employers whose business activities are being adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is open to employers who retain staff on payroll, some of the staff may be temporarily not working or some may be on reduced hours and/or reduced pay. Further information on this scheme is available at www.revenue.ie.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy at this time.

Social Welfare Benefits

761. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the details of each payment made by her Department to recipients of social welfare payments; the budget line of each payment operated by her Department; and the number of persons by county that receive each payment line in tabular form. [15521/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The 2020 Revised Estimates detailing the expenditure for all schemes of the Department as approved by the Dáil on 28th May 2020 is available on the *Gov.ie* website at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/36874-revised-estimate-for-the-department-of-employment-affairs-and-social-protection/>.

Officials in my Department are currently compiling the 2019 Annual Statistics Report, which will be published at <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/1b0ce-social-protection-statistics/> by 31st July 2020. The report details expenditure, recipient and beneficiary breakdowns, and the operational activity of the Department.

The information requested (where available) by the Deputy in respect of the number of recipients of a social protection payment by scheme and county at the end of May 2020 is detailed in the attached tabular statements.

[Revised Estimates]

Treatment Benefit Scheme

762. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the eligibility for a free hearing test in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15524/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Based on the available information, the person concerned will qualify for treatment benefit as a dependant spouse on her husband's insurance record.

In order for a formal approval of eligibility to issue to her audiologist, she should complete and return a signed ME2 form to the Treatment Benefit Section of the Department in Letterkenny. The relevant form has issued to her home address for completion.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Disability Allowance

763. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason a person (details supplied) was not paid the six week payment following the death of the person's spouse; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15527/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Where a person in receipt of disability allowance (DA) dies and he/she was claiming a qualified adult allowance then payment at both the personal and qualified adult rate continues to be made to the surviving spouse for six weeks after death. If a DA client dies and his/her surviving spouse is in receipt of a social welfare payment in their own right, then the surviving spouse is entitled to receive six weeks of their deceased spouse's payment in addition to their own.

Due to the current pandemic, DA is temporarily being paid in advance fortnightly. In this case the deceased person had received an additional week's payment prior to their date of death. The remaining five weeks after death payment has issued by cheque to the spouse of the person concerned on 8 July 2020.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 764 answered with Question No. 688.

Question No. 765 answered with Question No. 755.

Question No. 766 answered with Question No. 688.

Free Travel Scheme

767. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if she will introduce automatic access to free travel for persons with epilepsy who are prohibited from driving due to their epilepsy diagnoses; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15561/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):

The free travel scheme provides free travel on the main public and private transport services for those eligible under the scheme. These include road, rail and ferry services provided by companies such as Bus Átha Cliath, Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann, as well as Luas and services provided by over 80 private transport operators. There are currently approx. 976,000 customers with direct eligibility. The estimated expenditure on free travel in 2020 is €95 million.

Persons resident in Ireland who are over 66 and persons in receipt of certain social welfare payments are eligible for the scheme. The social welfare payments that allow persons aged under 66 to a free travel pass include disability allowance, invalidity pension, carer's allowance and partial capacity benefit. Disability allowance and invalidity pension are both long term illness payments, and so people in receipt of those payments will already have eligibility.

Any possible extension to the eligibility criteria for free travel, including to those who are not allowed to drive due to their epilepsy diagnosis, would have significant cost implications for the free travel scheme and would also require additional administrative processes to be put in place in order to adjudicate eligibility. Any decision to do so could only be considered in the context of overall budgetary negotiations.

Under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme (SWA), the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection may award a travel supplement, in any case where the circumstances of the case so warrant. The supplement is intended to assist with ongoing or recurring travel costs that cannot be met from the client's own resources and are deemed to be necessary. Every decision is based on consideration of the circumstances of the case, taking account of the nature and extent of the need and of the resources of the person concerned.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 768 answered with Question No. 742.

Carer's Allowance

769. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of carer's allowance reviews that have taken place in the past six months; the number of such decisions that were overturned on review; the number that were not overturned on review but subsequently overturned on appeal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15575/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):

Carer's Allowance (CA) is a means-tested payment, made to a person who is habitually resident in the State and providing full-time care and attention to a child or an adult who has such a disability that they require that level of care. An increased payment can be made where full-time care is being provided to two people.

Before a decision can be made on entitlement to CA, evidence must be provided in respect of the carer's habitual residence in the State, the level of care they provide, their means and also that the person being cared for has such a disability that they require full-time care and attention.

Carer's allowance reviews take place in a number of circumstances as follows:-

- If the decision on a new claim is negative the customer has the option of a review.
- Once claims are in payment, my Department undertakes periodic reviews as part of its

control strategy to ensure that there is continued entitlement.

- A customer can at any stage request a review of their entitlement.

As outlined above, a wide range of reviews are carried out arising from customer requests, together with reviews undertaken by the Department. I am advised that numbers are not readily available with respect to the number of CA reviews of claims conducted at the request of customers or of the number of negative decisions overturned on review.

I can advise the Deputy that while the Department records the number of control reviews undertaken and the saving achieved, it does not keep a record of the number who receive increased or decreased payments or whose payment remain unchanged.

Carer's allowance appeals take place in the circumstances as follows:-

- If the decision on a new claim is negative the customer has the option of an appeal.
- If a revised decision is made on any existing claim in payment, the customer has an option of appeal.

As outlined above, a wide range of Appeals are carried out arising from customer requests. I am advised that numbers are not readily available with respect to CA claims which were not overturned on review but subsequently overturned on appeal.

However I can advise the Deputy that:

- 605 Appeals were allowed to the end of June 2020
- 57 Appeals were partially allowed to the end of June 2020
- 1,006 Appeals were disallowed to the end of June 2020

In the same period, 1899 requests for Appeal were received.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Carer's Allowance

770. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the process for carrying out a review of a decision in an application for carer's allowance; the grade of the person responsible for making the decision on a review; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15576/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department is committed to providing a quality service to all its customers. This includes ensuring that reviews are processed and that decisions on entitlement are made as quickly as possible.

Carer's Allowance reviews take place in a number of circumstances as follows:-

- If the decision on a new claim is negative the customer has the option of a review
- Once claims are in payment, my Department undertakes periodic reviews as part of its control strategy to ensure that there is continued entitlement
- A customer can at any stage request a review of their entitlement.

As outlined above, a wide range of reviews are carried out arising from customer requests, together with reviews undertaken by the Department. Where a customer requests a review of a decision, every effort is made to ensure that this request is progressed as quickly as possible.

Similar to new applications, a Deciding Officer (DO) makes the final decision on each review. A DO can be at a number of grades.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

771. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a pandemic unemployment payment will be reinstated to a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15579/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Any person that is not satisfied with a decision of the Department has the option of having this decision reviewed.

A review of this withdrawal payment will now take place and an officer of the Department will contact the person concerned shortly regarding this.

I trust that this clarifies the matter.

Question No. 772 answered with Question No. 688.

Question No. 773 answered with Question No. 755.

Question No. 774 answered with Question No. 688.

Question No. 775 answered with Question No. 699.

Child Poverty

776. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the measures to be implemented to offset the expected increase in child poverty levels in 2020 following on the loss of employment due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15775/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As part of the overall Government response, my Department has implemented a number of measures to support families through these difficult times to ensure that income continues to flow into the households with children who need it most. This includes the decision taken at the beginning of the pandemic to allow for key family social welfare payments such as One-Parent Family Payment and Working Family Payment to be paid concurrently with the Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

My Department also provides financial supports to families and their children through the Increase for a Qualified Child, which is paid in addition to primary social welfare payments such as the Working Family Payment, Child Benefit and One-parent Family Payment. In addition, families on low income may be eligible for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance. The School Meals programme has also been extended for the summer months as a direct response to potential food poverty being experienced by children at this challenging time.

For those who are not eligible for these supports, they may be able to receive financial support from the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme.

Furthermore, we know that households where adults are in employment are less likely to experience child poverty; therefore the Government will continue to work to support to creation of jobs and the reopening of the economy in line with public health advice.

Question No. 777 answered with Question No. 693.

Springboard Programme

778. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the position of those in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment in accessing Springboard courses; the reason some who have applied in recent days have been told that their employment status is unknown, including those whose sectors are still closed down due to Covid-19 restrictions but are still employed by their respective companies or businesses; the reason these persons are being told to refer to their local case workers when they have not been assigned such a case worker; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15782/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Department's part-time education option and back to education allowance provide income support for jobseekers who wish to pursue Springboard courses. The main focus of these income supports are to assist qualifying applicants to improve their educational qualifications and improve their prospects of gaining employment while maintaining a welfare payment.

It is expected that, during the course of the roadmap to recovery, as many people as possible in receipt of the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment will return to employment prior to the commencement of the Springboard 2020/21 academic year.

At the point of commencement of a new course of education a person in receipt of the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment will be required to establish an entitlement to a Jobseeker's payment. I would advise that the details of the cases referred to by the deputy are provided to my department for review.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Question No. 779 answered with Question No. 693.

Invalidity Pension

780. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the reason contribution conditions for the invalidity pension include a condition (details supplied). [15896/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Social insurance benefits are made available on the basis that when a certain contingency or risk materialises the person involved will need a replacement income. Benefits are intended to replace lost income where a person is, for some reason, not able to engage with the labour force. Invalidity Pension, for example, is payable where a person is permanently incapable of work. Where there is no recent history of contributions being paid or credited then there is no entitlement to most benefits.

Invalidity pension is a substantial and long-term payment for persons who are permanently incapable of work and who satisfy the social insurance conditions. A total of 260 weeks contributions paid and 48 weeks contributions paid or credited in the last complete tax year before the relevant date or in the tax year before the last complete tax year are required to satisfy the PRSI conditions for Invalidity Pension. The reckonable contribution classes are A, E, H and S.

A person may keep up their contribution record in a number of ways. One of these is by credited contributions. A credited contribution is a PRSI contribution awarded to an insured person under certain circumstances, such as proved unemployment. Credited contributions are an integral part of the social insurance system. For the most part they are linked to having an underlying entitlement to a social welfare payment while temporarily detached from the labour force or having entitlement to statutory leave. The primary purpose of credited contributions is to secure social welfare benefits and pensions of employees by covering gaps in insurance where they are not in a position to pay PRSI such as during periods of unemployment, illness, etc. Credits ensure that a person's insurance record is maintained and can be helpful at a later stage to qualify for other social welfare benefits, such as pensions or to increase the rate of pension that may become payable.

Appropriate social insurance contributions paid in another European Union Member-State can count for the purpose of bridging a contribution gap – provided that one social insurance contribution is made in Ireland.

Persons who have an insufficient contribution record to qualify for a social insurance benefit may apply for the appropriate means-tested social assistance scheme. For example persons, between the ages of 16 and 66 who are suffering from an illness or disability which is expected to last at least 1 year, may qualify for disability allowance. Disability allowance recipients must be habitually resident in the State.

Question No. 781 answered with Question No. 690.

Citizens Information Board

782. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the estimated cost in 2021 if the budget for the Citizens Information Board increased by 6%. [15952/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The allocation for the Citizen's Information Board is €61.8 million, as published in the 2020 Revised Estimates passed by the Dáil on 28th May 2020.

The cost of increasing expenditure by 6% would be €3.7 million.

Civil Registration Service

783. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection when section 21A of the Civil Registration (Amendment) Act 2014 will be enacted. [15954/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I understand the Deputy is referring to section 21 of the Civil Registration (Amendment) Act 2004. The provisions relate to Civil Partnerships. These and other provisions relating to Civil Partnerships were repealed by the Marriage Act 2015 and no longer appear in the Statute.

I hope this clarifies this matter for the Deputy.

State Pension (Contributory)

784. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of a contributory pension application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15980/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The person concerned applied for State pension (contributory) on 10 February 2020 and was awarded a pension at 90% of the maximum rate with effect from their 66th birthday, 11 May 2020. They were notified in writing of this decision and arrears due on 9 July 2020.

Following correspondence received from the person concerned regarding their social insurance record prior to 1979, the matter was referred to my Department's Central Records Section. Additional information was requested on 14 March 2020 and was received on 27 March 2020. The matter remains under review. When the review is complete, the person concerned will be notified in writing of the outcome.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Question No. 785 answered with Question No. 699.

Question No. 786 answered with Question No. 688.

Social Welfare Application Forms

787. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if consideration will be given to rolling out changes to social services forms for children, such as child benefit, disability allowance, which currently ask for name of father and name of mother to reflect the diverse society of Ireland and the move away from the view as the traditional family unit. [16014/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Over the last number of years Irish society has changed, as has the make up of our families within Ireland. This diversity in Irish family structures makes for a more inclusive and open society, and is to be welcomed.

In terms of promoting equality and diversity, my own Department has been progressive in such matter, for example, developing Gender Recognition Legislation (2015) to enable people to achieve full legal recognition of their preferred gender and to receive a new birth certificate that reflects the change.

The Department's Communications and Customer Service Unit develops all printed forms in accordance with the principles set out in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reforms 'Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service' and in applying plain English standards to existing forms.

With over one hundred Departmental forms, a schedule of form reviews and updates is continually being progressed, and the Department regularly consults with stakeholder groups when developing or updating forms to ensure the use of clear terminology and plain English.

In reference to specific terminology, legislation can make reference to specific names for example, Maternity Benefit legislation makes reference to the term mother and any change to any terminology will need to be examined to ensure that it is aligned with the relevant legislation, where applicable. Notwithstanding this, the Department is keen to ensure that our forms are accessible and inclusive and is committed to adopting language that is inclusive and clear, and reflect the society we live in.

I thank the Deputy for his suggestion and confirm it will be considered by the Department.

Question No. 788 answered with Question No. 703.

State Pensions

789. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection if a deferral of a State pension payment to a person (details supplied) in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment will be permitted; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16025/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): According to the records of my Department, the person concerned has been awarded State pension (contributory) at 65% of the maximum rate with effect from their 66th birthday, 27 May 2020. The person's pension entitlement was reviewed on 3 July 2020; they are in receipt of the correct rate of State pension (contributory), commensurate with their insurance record.

The Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced as an emergency measure so that payments could be made as quickly as possible to the large number of people who became fully unemployed due to the pandemic. In common with general jobseeker's payments, the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment is payable to people between the ages of 18 and 66. Accordingly, once the person concerned reached pension age, they were no longer eligible for this income support.

Employers in Ireland can claim the temporary wage subsidy for all of their workers, who pay Irish PAYE income tax, from the Revenue Commissioners. In this way workers who are aged over 66 can continue, with the co-operation of their employers, to receive employment income of at least 70% of their normal wage. Further information on the supports available to employees and employers in relation to COVID-19 can be found at www.gov.ie.

Recipients of state pension payments may, depending on their individual circumstances, have access to a range of other income supports not available to unemployed people – including the free fuel allowance, the living alone increase, the household benefits package (gas/electricity), the telephone support allowance, free travel and the free TV licence.

The person concerned may wish to consider applying for State pension (non-contributory) which is a means-tested, residency-based payment for people of pension age. Social welfare legislation provides that the means test takes account of the income and assets of the applicant (and spouse/civil partner/cohabitant as applicable). Income and assets include income from employment, self-employment, occupational pensions, maintenance payments as well as property owned (other than the family home) and capital such as savings, shares and other investments.

The living alone increase has been awarded to the person concerned with their State pension (contributory). Free travel has also been awarded.

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Since fuel allowance is a means-tested payment, information regarding the person's means (bank statements) was requested on 8 June 2020, and again on 10 July 2020. When this information is received, the person's eligibility for fuel allowance can be determined and they will be notified of the outcome. Where a customer is eligible for both the living alone increase and fuel allowance, they automatically qualify for a telephone support allowance.

I have arranged for application forms for the Household Benefits Package and the State pension (non-contributory) to be issued. As soon as these applications are completed and returned, the person's eligibility for these respective schemes will be determined and they will be notified in writing of the outcome. If assessed with an entitlement to State pension (non-contributory) at a higher rate than their current State pension (contributory) payment, the person will be awarded the more financially beneficial pension. Both pensions cannot be paid concurrently.

Where someone is experiencing financial hardship they can apply for assistance through the means tested Supplementary Welfare Allowance. Queries in relation to eligibility should be made by phone to their local Intreo Centre.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Jobseeker's Payments

790. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the number of those aged 65 years of age in receipt of jobseeker's allowance and jobseeker's benefit at the end of each of the years 2012 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [16038/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The information requested by the Deputy in relation to the number of people aged 65 years of age in receipt of jobseeker's allowance and jobseeker's benefit at the end of each of the years 2012 to 2019 and to date in 2020 is detailed in the attached tabular statement.

The number of recipients of jobseeker's allowance and jobseeker's benefit aged 65 years of age at the end of each of the years 2012 to 2019 and at the end of June 2020.

	Jobseeker's Allowance	Jobseeker's Benefit	Total
2012	1,097	571	1,668
2013	1,149	455	1,604
2014	2,196	2,332	4,528
2015	2,416	2,561	4,997
2016	2,540	2,647	5,187
2017	2,761	2,897	5,658
2018	2,741	2,744	5,485
2019	2,530	2,581	5,111
June 2020	2,209	2,290	4,499

Citizens Information Services

791. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection her plans to secure the future of citizen information centres in an area (details supplied); if there are plans to reduce centres in the country generally; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16039/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):

The Citizens Information Board (CIB) is the statutory body responsible for supporting the provision of information, advice (including money and budgeting advice) and advocacy services on a wide range of public and social services. CIB delivers on this remit through its provision of some services directly to the public and through a network of service delivery companies.

During the Covid-19 crisis, CIB developed a national Covid-19 response across all its services and introduced a range of additional measures to address the needs of citizens in a situation where local Citizens Information Centres were closed to the public in line with public health guidelines.

Dublin South Citizens Information Service continues to respond to queries by telephone and email in order to meet the most immediate information, advice and advocacy needs of people arising from loss of work and income, closure of businesses and schools and many other issues of concern to people living in its area.

Within the Dublin South area, planning is underway to commence an appointment based service for callers within a limited number of Citizens Information Centres (CIC's) where social distancing can be facilitated in line with current HSE Covid-19 public health advice and Return to Work Safely protocol.

Tallaght CIC is now opened for face to face appointments; Dun Laoghaire CIC will commence an appointment service from 27th July; while Ballyfermot and Rathmines will follow from mid-August or early September.

The Dublin South CIS company, which has responsibility for service provision in the southern areas of Dublin has no plans to reduce services in this area.

The aim of the 8 regional service delivery companies in the country is to continue to deliver a high-quality information, advice and advocacy service to citizens in their respective geographic areas.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

792. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection the status of the inclusion of persons over 66 years of age who were at work when the Covid-19 pandemic struck within the pandemic unemployment payment in recognition of their sudden loss of earnings. [16120/20]

Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):

The Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment is available to people aged between 18 and 66 years, and the age range is consistent with other jobseeker and social protection income supports paid to people of working age. People aged 66 years and over are provided for within the Social Protection income support framework through the State Pension, either the contributory State pension based on PRSI contributions or the non-contributory means tested pension.

A person in receipt of the State contributory pension can retain all of their State pension as well as their employment income and retain that pension payment if they lose employment income, thus guaranteeing an income support. If a person is not in receipt of the maximum rate of State Pension Contributory, they may be eligible for an increased weekly rate of payment on the State non-contributory means tested pension, depending on their circumstances. A person

may also be entitled to an increase in respect of a qualified adult, subject to the means of the qualified adult.

People in receipt of the non-contributory or means-tested pension who are also in receipt of an employment income may have their pension payment increased if they lose that employment income or it is reduced. Similarly, if a person aged 66 or over who did not previously qualify for or make an application for a means-tested pension may qualify for a pension payment if their circumstances change – including if they lose any employment income or if that employment income is reduced. A person may be entitled to claim for an increase in respect of a qualified adult up to age 66 years depending on the specific circumstances.

People aged 66 and over may also be entitled to a range of ancillary supports that are aligned to the particular circumstances of older people and are significantly more valuable than those generally available to people of working age. These include free travel, fuel allowance, household benefits package (gas/electricity) and living alone allowance.

It should be noted also that employers may claim the temporary wage subsidy for all of their workers who pay Irish PAYE income tax from the Revenue Commissioners. In this way workers who are aged over 66 can continue, with the co-operation of their employers, to receive income from employment.

A person of any age who is experiencing financial hardship may access assistance under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme including Exceptional and Urgent Needs Payments.

I trust that this clarifies the position.

National Broadband Plan

793. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the broadband points planned for a location (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14934/20]

796. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when surveys for areas (details supplied) will be completed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15517/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 793 and 796 together.

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 to almost 540,000 premises across the State.

Among the first premises to be connected under the NBP are approximately 300 Broadband Connection Points (BCPs). Each site will be provided with a wireless high speed broadband connection which will make free on-site internet connectivity available to the public. Site owners have volunteered their premises to host public BCP services, thus supporting their communities and ensuring they get a head start on rural connectivity.

The planned BCP locations are listed by county on NBI's website at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>. These sites have been carefully selected by Local Authorities, in consultation with local communities and site owners, so that they can provide free public Wi-Fi to support residents of rural communities likely to wait longest for a connection under the fully NBP deployment.

It should be noted that some BCP sites may change over time as commercial connectivity becomes more widespread and as the circumstances at each site change.

The delivery of the BCP project is well under way, with initial connectivity provided to a number of sites by National Broadband Ireland. In parallel, Vodafone will begin installing the public access equipment at each site over the coming weeks.

With regard to the sites referred to by the Deputy, both sites have been surveyed to establish their connectivity requirements and they will receive their broadband connectivity in accordance with NBI and Vodafone's schedules over the coming months.

Appointments to State Boards

794. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of applicants for the position of chairman of the Western Development Commission; when a decision will be made in respect of the appointment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15121/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Public Appointment Service recently advertised for Expressions of Interest for upcoming vacancies on the Board of the Western Development Commission, including Expressions of Interest in the position of Chairperson. The deadline for submission of applications was Friday the 12th June.

The Public Appointment Service (PAS) is currently processing the applications received and an Assessment Panel has been formed by PAS to consider these applications.

A list of recommended suitable candidates for both the Chairperson and ordinary board member vacancies will be submitted by PAS for my consideration and I expect appointments to the Board of the WDC to be made by mid-August.

Seniors Alert Scheme

795. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if a personal pendant alarm can be facilitated in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15289/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department is responsible for the Seniors Alert Scheme which encourages community support for vulnerable older people in our communities through the provision of personal monitored alarms to enable them to live securely in their homes with confidence, independence and peace of mind. Funding is available under the scheme towards the purchase by a registered community-based organisation of a personal alarm or pendant.

Following a review, the current version of the scheme came into effect on 1 November 2017. A number of changes were introduced under the new scheme including the provision of free monitoring for the first year and a revision of the living alone requirements. However, eligibility to the Scheme remains confined to those aged 65 or older.

Question No. 796 answered with Question No. 793.

Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

797. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the reason each of the rural regeneration development fund second call for category 2 applications by a local authority (details supplied) were rejected; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15533/20]

803. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of an application for funding under the rural regeneration and development fund for a group (details supplied); if the current application will be considered for funding in a forthcoming tranche of the scheme; the reason for the failure of the application in the most recent round of announcements; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15141/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 797 and 803 together.

The second call for Category 2 applications for the Fund closed on 28th February and there was an excellent response from all across the country, with 76 applications received.

On 25th June 2020, Minister Ring announced details of 24 successful projects arising from this call. The successful projects have been allocated €13m in support from the Fund and will deliver a total investment worth €17m. To date, the Fund has now allocated €161 million in support for 134 projects across Ireland, worth a combined total of €229 million.

The application process for the Fund is competitive in nature and applications undergo comprehensive scrutiny, involving assessment by my Department under the oversight of a Project Advisory Board, comprised of representatives from key Government Departments as well as independent experts. On foot of this process, a report on recommended projects is submitted to the Minister to inform decision-making in relation to the allocation of funding to successful projects.

My Department has informed me that a further limited announcement is possible, subject to budgetary availability.

It should also be noted that the third call for Category 1 applications - relating to projects with all planning and other consents in place and ready to commence works - is now open and the closing date for applications is the 1st December 2020.

Local Improvement Scheme

798. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if funding will be provided for the local improvement scheme in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15846/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Local Improvement Scheme, or LIS, is a programme for improvement works on private or non-public roads in rural areas which are not under the normal maintenance of the Local Authorities. The scheme is funded by my Department and is administered through the Local Authorities.

In March this year, €10 million was allocated to Local Authorities for the 2020 Local Improvement Scheme, and each Local Authority was provided with the same allocation as 2019.

Over €58 million has now been allocated to the Local Authorities to deliver the LIS since

the scheme was relaunched in 2017.

All of the Local Authorities have already determined the roads to be funded under the scheme this year in their respective administrative areas. Funding in respect of these roads can be drawn down by the Local Authorities when the required works are completed.

Walks Scheme

799. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when a decision will be made on an application by a centre (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14724/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department administers the Walks Scheme which contracts 1,962 landholders to undertake maintenance work on 39 National Waymarked Ways and other priority trails that traverse their lands. The landholders receive modest payments for maintenance work undertaken in line with agreed work plans.

In December last, 10 new trails were to added to the Walks Scheme. These trails constitute the first phase of an expansion that will see the Walks Scheme doubling in size to approximately 80 trails when all phases of the expansion are complete. Trails that wish to be added to the Scheme are invited to submit an Expressions of Interest to my Department. There is no closing date for Expressions of Interest at this time, and interested parties can continue to submit proposals for additional trails to be included in the Walks Scheme, through their Local Authority or Local Development Company. A trail must meet specific qualifying criteria in order to be considered eligible for the scheme, including being of a suitable standard to be included in Sport Ireland Outdoors' trail register.

I can confirm that an Expression of Interest has been received in respect of the trail referred to by the Deputy. I understand that this trail will need to be inspected by Sport Ireland Outdoors to confirm that it is a suitable standard before it can be considered for inclusion under the scheme.

A decision in respect of the new trails to be added to the Scheme will be taken following the completion a review of the Walks Scheme, which is currently in train.

Ministerial Responsibilities

800. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will provide a copy of the departmental briefings received by her and each Minister of State in her Department upon taking up each individual role; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14809/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I can confirm that the Department briefing provided to myself and my ministerial colleagues in the Department upon my appointment will be published on my Department's website in the coming weeks.

Charitable and Voluntary Organisations

801. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development her plans to address the drop of funding and consequent service delivery by critical charities due to Covid-19. [14911/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Charities, community organisations and social enterprises, along with the volunteers who assist them, have been an integral part of our country's response to this pandemic. A cessation in income generating activities and fundraising, as a consequence of COVID-19 restrictions, has severely impacted many of these same organisations.

My Department has responded to the urgent needs of charities, community and voluntary organisations and social enterprises experiencing such financial difficulties. There has been no reduction in the funding awarded to charities from my Department, with some additional financial supports being introduced with this critical need in mind.

In conjunction, new flexibilities have also been implemented in existing support schemes and programmes, supporting these organisations to find new and innovative ways of adapting and delivering essential services in a changing economic and societal landscape.

In April 2020, my Department launched a €2.5 million COVID-19 Emergency Fund for those groups taking part in the 'Community Call'. Administered through the Local Authorities, this initiative was an immediate response to support the emergency efforts by community and voluntary groups in assisting people at a local level.

Separately, my Department introduced a €40 million package of supports for community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises. The €35 million COVID-19 Stability Fund delivers a once-off cash injection to those organisations providing critical front-line services to the most at 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. The first tranche of this fund, totalling €10.5 million, was allocated in late June 2020 to 179 qualifying organisations.

€5 million has also been committed to The Innovate Together Fund, which is also accepting philanthropic donations. The focus of this Fund is on responses to the COVID-19 crisis that will deliver innovative and adaptive solutions to existing and emerging social challenges. These innovations will support the most vulnerable in our society, those most affected by the crisis and will ultimately help to make our society more inclusive, equal and sustainable.

The Government recognises that significant challenges remain for community and voluntary groups and charities during this time. Collaboration and partnership between the sector and the State are key to co-ordinating and responding to the needs of our communities. My Department will continue to work closely with the sector in managing through these challenges over the coming months.

Ministerial Responsibilities

802. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for community development and charities; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15049/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am currently in discussions regarding the delegation of functions and am looking forward to making a formal assignment of responsibilities to the Minister of State, in my Department, in the

coming weeks.

Question No. 803 answered with Question No. 797.

Local Improvement Scheme

804. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when further funding will be released to local authorities to complete local improvement scheme roads; the amount made available to each local authority in respect of each of the years 2018, 2019 and 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15147/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Local Improvement Scheme, or LIS, is a programme for improvement works on private or non-public roads in rural areas which are not under the normal maintenance of the Local Authorities. The scheme is funded by my Department and is administered through the Local Authorities.

Over €58 million has been allocated to the Local Improvement Scheme (LIS) since it was reintroduced in 2017, resulting in the approval of over 2,000 roads projects.

€17.4 million was allocated to Local Authorities in 2017, while €20.8 million was allocated in 2018 and €10 million was allocated in 2019.

In March of this year, a further €10 million was allocated to Local Authorities under the 2020 Local Improvement Scheme, and each Local Authority was provided with the same financial allocation as 2019.

All of the Local Authorities have already determined the roads to be funded under the scheme this year. Funding in respect of these roads can be drawn down by the Local Authorities when the required works are completed

The table below outlines the amount of funding allocated under LIS in each of the years 2018, 2019 and 2020, as requested.

Table: LIS allocations 2018-2020

County	2018 Allocation	2019 Allocation	2020 Allocation
Carlow	€528,279	€250,000	€250,000
Cavan	€636,680	€269,254	€269,254
Clare	€1,038,844	€480,811	€480,811
Cork	€1,700,000	€900,000	€900,000
Donegal	€1,792,516	€677,456	€677,456
Galway	€1,942,000	€856,959	€856,959
Kerry	€1,209,990	€669,930	€669,930
Kildare	€329,591	€250,000	€250,000
Kilkenny	€679,683	€288,905	€288,905
Laois	€568,255	€250,000	€250,000
Leitrim	€550,120	€250,000	€250,000
Limerick	€684,349	€384,092	€384,090
Longford	€472,217	€250,000	€250,000
Louth	€250,000	€250,000	€250,000
Mayo	€1,843,235	€778,496	€778,496
Meath	€773,404	€326,394	€326,394

County	2018 Allocation	2019 Allocation	2020 Allocation
Monaghan	€540,841	€250,000	€250,000
Offaly	€644,654	€278,871	€278,871
Roscommon	€820,968	€355,104	€355,104
Sligo	€606,870	€256,154	€256,154
Tipperary	€794,400	€599,969	€599,969
Waterford	€607,047	€258,802	€258,802
Westmeath	€607,224	€256,433	€256,433
Wexford	€511,410	€329,878	€329,878
Wicklow	€668,135	€282,494	€282,494
TOTAL	€20,800,712	€10,000,002	€10,000,000

Departmental Schemes

805. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the schemes available to community groups, agencies or local authorities from her Department to assist in the development of walking and cycling infrastructure; the maximum amounts available under such schemes including matching contribution amounts required; the timelines and anticipated closing dates for applications for such schemes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15168/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The main scheme operated by my Department for the specific development of outdoor recreation infrastructure is the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS).

ORIS provides funding for the development and/or enhancement of outdoor recreational infrastructure such as cycleways, walking trails, blueways and mountain access routes in rural areas.

The 2020 scheme was launched on the 29th May last and is funded by my Department in partnership with Fáilte Ireland. In response to impact of COVID-19, the 2020 scheme will support recreational infrastructure that provides amenities for local communities and/or delivers added value from a tourism perspective, positioning rural areas to respond to the post-COVID-19 economic recovery.

The 2020 scheme has an Exchequer budget of €10 million and will be delivered through three separate Measures as follows:

- **Measure 1:** Small Scale Repair/Promotion and Marketing - Grant Amounts: up to €20,000.
- **Measure 2:** Medium Scale Repair/Upgrade and New Trail/Amenity Development - Grant Amounts: up to €200,000.
- **Measure 3:** Large Scale Repair/Upgrade and New Strategic Trail/Amenity Development - Grant amounts: up to €500,000.

A grant rate of up to 90% of the project's costs will be available from my Department across all three Measures in 2020. This should ensure that the requirement for communities, Local Authorities and agencies to source matching funding is kept to a minimum.

The closing date for receipt of applications under ORIS Measure 1 is 30th September 2020, while the closing date for applications under Measures 2 and 3 is 30th November 2020.

The Scheme Outline for ORIS 2020 is available on the Gov.ie website at <https://www.gov.ie>.

ie/en/policy-information/fd0c9f-outdoor-recreation-infrastructure-scheme/.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

806. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the supports in place for voluntary organisations that have been unable to raise funds during the Covid-19 pandemic and are now in danger of having to close down. [15959/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government is aware of the challenges facing community and voluntary organisations and is committed to working closely with the sector in managing through these, recognising that it will require a whole of Government approach. In that context my Department is providing funding supports to organisations through a number of different schemes.

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 fund will provide €35 million of funding through the Dormant Accounts Fund (DAF) and the criteria align with DAF objectives 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.

Over one thousand applications were received during the application period. Due to the considerable interest in the Stability Scheme and in order to ensure that funding is released as quickly as possible, applicants were considered in smaller groupings.

The first tranche of funding was announced on Friday 26 June last, with 179 organisations being awarded €10.5 million in funding, the full list can be found at the following link:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3957e-covid-19-stability-fund-successful-applicants/>.

Decisions on further tranches are being now being considered.

The Innovate Together Fund was opened on 13 May 2020. The focus of the Fund is on supporting innovative responses to the Covid-19 crisis and is supported by a commitment of €5 million from my Department via the Dormant Accounts Fund. Social Innovation Fund Ireland pledges to raise additional philanthropic funds for this initiative and is responsible for the administration of the Fund with oversight from my Department. Applications are open to established charities, social enterprises and to local, regional and national voluntary groups and organisations who are based in Ireland and who are delivering services to the most vulnerable communities immediately impacted by COVID-19. The first round of funding under this fund is now closed and applications are being assessed. Further rounds of funding will be announced in due course.

The Community Enhancement Programme provides small capital grants to community groups to improve facilities in their area, and the 2020 Programme was launched recently with funding of €2m. The Department gives flexibility to Local Community Development Com-

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mittees (LCDCs) to tailor the programme in each Local Authority area, so that it meets local priorities. It is recommended that applicants contact the LCDC in their area for further details.

The Community Services Programme (CSP), currently supports over 400 community organisations and my Department is fully committed to continuing to support those organisations. My Department has put in place an additional Support Fund for 2020 which will provide additional funding for a number of weeks to many of these organisations, ensuring that they can pay their full-time CSP supported employees a maximum of €350 net per week, with a proportionate amount for part-time CSP supported employees.

In addition to the measures which have been introduced by my Department for community and voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises, the Government has put in place a range of supports and guidance for businesses impacted by COVID-19.

A downloadable guide to these supports and their eligibility criteria is available at the link:

<https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Supports-for-businesses-impacted-by-COVID-19.pdf>.

Details of enhanced government supports for businesses announced on 2 May 2020 are available at the link:

<https://dbe.gov.ie/en/News-And-Events/Department-News/2020/May/02052020.html>.

Inquiries can be directed to the relevant contact points listed in the material.

My Department is continuing to liaise with representatives of the community and voluntary, charity and social enterprise sectors and with other Departments with relevant policy responsibility in relation to the challenges faced at this time. Assurances have been provided in relation to the continuation of exchequer funding supports for organisations in the sector. It is also worth mentioning that the Government Wage Subsidy Scheme will support employers in the sector to retain staff who are employed under non-Exchequer funding sources

Public Inquiries

807. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of tribunals, public investigations and commissions of investigations in process; the length of time each has been under way; when each will conclude; the cost to date of each; and the estimated cost of each at completion. [16139/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department, which was established on 19 July 2017, does not have any tribunals, public investigations or commissions of investigations in process.

Brexit Issues

808. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the current stance on the fishing industry regarding the UK claim to territorial fishing waters and the possibility of Irish fishermen losing up to half of their existing fishing territories under the present Brexit negotiations, in view of the fact that it has far reaching implications for fishermen in County Wexford and nationally; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15698/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): I would like to assure the Deputy that I fully understand that fisheries are vitally important in economic and socioeconomic terms for our coastal communities. I met, by video link, with the Fisheries Commissioner, Virginijus Sinkevicius on Friday 10 July last. I discussed with the Commissioner the importance of the agreed EU negotiation mandate that sets down clearly the EU objective to “uphold existing reciprocal access conditions, quota shares and traditional activity of the Union fleet”. I also discussed the centrality of the link between the overall economic partnership and the conclusion of a fishing agreement.

This was a very useful first discussion with Commissioner Sinkevicius and it was important to be able to talk first hand with the Commissioner about Ireland’s concerns in relation to the potential negative impacts for our fishing communities in Ireland if we do not put in place a fair and balanced Fisheries Agreement with the UK. I reiterated this Government’s full support for the EU negotiating mandate and my confidence that the Commissioner and Michel Barnier will continue to be strong defenders of Irish and EU fishing interests.

I will be meeting with representatives from the fishing industry, including from the Irish South & East Fish Producers Organisation, this week to discuss their concerns in respect of fisheries and the UK’s withdrawal from the EU.

It is evident that progress on fisheries has been disappointing so far. This is one of the most difficult areas under negotiation. Fisheries is an important priority for Ireland. We are seeking to protect the interests of the Irish fleet in terms of both access and the quota share it currently enjoys in UK waters. From the outset of the negotiations, Ireland and our EU partners have been clear on our level of ambition in this area and on the fact that progress on an overall trade deal is linked to progress on fisheries. This is reflected in the EU mandate and the draft EU legal text. The EU position was the result of considerable internal discussion and reflects a delicate balance. In sum, we are seeking to uphold continued levels of reciprocal access and stable quotas. The UK Government has a very different approach. They emphasise their status as a “coastal independent state” and insist that new arrangements should be based on annual negotiations, which follow the principle of zonal attachment. Clearly, the two sides are still very far apart. This is very concerning to us – as is reflected in the EU mandate, one of our key priorities is to avoid economic dislocation for Union fishermen that have operated in UK waters. This remains our collective approach. The Task Force is continuing to push for better UK engagement on this area.

Michel Barnier has reiterated that he has a very clear mandate regarding the fisheries sector. He has also been crystal clear that fisheries is an integral part of the negotiations and cannot be separated from progress on other trade issues. Mr Barnier met in late May with fisheries Ministers, where there was clear consensus, including from Ireland, on continued support for the EU mandate’s position on fisheries. The Government fully supports Mr Barnier in his role and we remain confident that Irish and EU fisheries interests will continue to be protected after the transition period has ended.

Hardship Grant Scheme

809. **Deputy Frankie Feighan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a dedicated hardship fund will be made available to the farmers affected by the flooding and landslides in Drumkeeran, County Leitrim; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14687/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): I visited Drum-

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keerin on Monday 13th July to see the situation first-hand and to meet local farmers and public representatives. I have asked officials in my Department to undertake preliminary reports on the farming and forestry related impacts on the bog slide and I have been liaising with my colleague Minister of State, Deputy Malcolm Noonan in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, on this matter. In the first instance, the broader inquiry and issues arising from the bog slide are a matter for the Leitrim Country Council, and I will continue to liaise with officials in this regard.

I have assured farmers that their direct payment scheme payments are covered by the existing force majeure regulations in place. The terms and conditions for the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) and the Areas of Natural Constraints (ANC) scheme include provision for force majeure cases, and these provisions would include instances such as the recent bog slide. Where a farmer is concerned that this event might have an impact on their scheme payments, they should contact the Department to inform it of the circumstances of their own case and to provide any evidence of the impact on their own landholding (Geotag Photos). Farmers can write to the Direct Payments Unit, Government Offices, Abbeyleix Road, Portlaoise or ring 076 106 4420. This will ensure that the Department is aware of cases which may be impacted and all such cases will be examined individually.

Felling Licences

810. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of a felling licence application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14691/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): The Forestry Act 2014 sets out the legislative requirements in relation to tree felling. A tree felling licence must be obtained from my Department and trees felled must be replanted, regardless of whether the trees in question were funded by means of a grant or by the landowner.

The person named made an application for a tree felling licence in February 2020. The applicant has not provided details of how it is intended to replant the felled land and that information is needed in order to make a decision on the application.

It is open to the applicant to plant an alternative site, of the same size and with the same species, in order to meet the replanting obligation. Prior approval for the alternative site must be obtained before a tree felling licence will issue.

Greyhound Industry

811. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of runners, greyhounds injured and greyhounds that died or were put to sleep from 1 January 2020 to date by month in tabular form; and the cause of each injury and death by each greyhound track. [14734/20]

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

The question raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for Bord na gCon and therefore the question has been referred to the body for direct reply.

Forestry Management

812. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a fence will be erected at a location (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14781/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): Coillte is operationally independent of my Department and matters such as the day-to-day management of their forest estate, are the responsibility of the company.

I have therefore passed the question raised to Coillte for response and direct reply to the Deputy.

Forestry Management

813. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the person or body that decided ring barking is a good forestry practice (details supplied); the planned number of acres of forest for ring barking in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14785/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): Ring-barking has been applied on a trial basis in selected conifer stands as part of the EU co-funded Kerry-LIFE Project, a demonstration project to restore the endangered freshwater pearl mussel (FPM) within two catchments in Co. Kerry.

Under this project, ring-barking is applied to young conifer stems to create open space around existing birch trees, thereby enabling the natural regeneration of the birch. The application is repeated over a number of years until eventually the 'halos' of emerging birch merge, thereby resulting in the ecologically-sensitive transformation of the conifer stand into native woodland. Ring-barking is also described in the draft Plan for Forests and Freshwater Pearl Mussel (FPM) in Ireland, released by the Department in mid-2018, as a prescription for the gradual elimination of individual and small groups of trees, in areas where their sudden removal by felling would be harmful to FPM.

Ring-barking would not be considered as normal forest practice and would only be acceptable in very limited circumstances, such as those described above.

A tree felling licence is required where a tree is to be felled or caused to fall (regardless of the methods used) and must be granted before any management operation takes place.

Ministerial Responsibilities

814. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide a copy of the departmental briefings received by him and each Minister of State in his Department upon taking up each individual role; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14795/20]

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Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): I wish to advise the Deputy that the briefing material I received on my appointment as Minister has been published on my Department's official website at the following link: <https://www.agriculture.gov.ie/aboutus/briefingforministers2020/>.

The same briefing material was provided to the Ministers of State on their appointments to the Department.

Forestry Sector

815. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of a forestry road application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14937/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): A forest road licence was issued to the person named on 14th May, 2020. The decision was also issued to those who had made a submission on the licence application.

The decision has been appealed to the Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC). The FAC is operationally independent of my Department and will be in touch with the person named regarding the appeal hearing in due course.

Brexit Supports

816. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if cattle that are exported live will be considered under the formulation of the new beef exceptional aid measure, BEAM, scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14940/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): The recently announced €50 million Beef package will be targeted towards beef finishers in recognition of the fact that they have borne the most immediate and severe economic impact arising from the market disturbance arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The scheme is being designed to be as farmer-friendly as possible to ensure that the support can be most effectively targeted where it is needed.

My Department officials have engaged with farming stakeholders, who were also invited to make written submissions regarding the development of the scheme. These submissions are now under consideration and the measure is under development.

The measure is required to be notified to the European Commission under the new COVID-19 temporary exceptional aid framework. My Department is currently finalising the required documentation and expects to be in a position to submit the formal notification shortly.

I hope to be in a position to announce details of the measure, including terms and conditions, in August.

Felling Licences

817. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding forestry; and if he will make a statement

on the matter. [14948/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): 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. Citizens are, of course, perfectly entitled to appeal licensing decisions, but since the introduction of modifications in the licensing process, the majority of my Department's licensing decisions are being confirmed at the Forestry Appeals Committee. This gives confidence in these revised procedures.

We now have a project plan for dealing with the current backlog and new files, which includes extra resources as follows:

- Nine new forestry inspectors will be recruited in 2020, and four temporary forestry inspectors have been recruited, to work on licensing.

- Three new ecologists have joined the Department ecology team, with three more to be appointed shortly.

- We have engaged external ecological expertise to help with the backlog of files. Four local ecologists have also been contracted provide extra support. Further, an ecology contract with five new ecologists has been started.

- 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.

The project plan is a targeted, process-driven approach which prioritise files in a manner which will result in an increased number of licences being issued in the short-term and will deliver a return to expected timelines in the longer term. A categorisation of files, in terms of size and proximity to European designated sites, has been conducted so that those likely to have a similar effect on the environment may be grouped together. Applicants who have or are prepared to submit a Natura Impact Statement, where appropriate, will be prioritised.

A Project Management Board, with a dedicated Project Manager, will oversee and monitor delivery. There will be a continuous review of the process, in order to effect efficiencies. A communication plan to keep stakeholders fully and regularly informed of progress, with a

dedicated central resource to deal with queries, is a key element of the project. While much of the success of the project plan lies with my Department, stakeholders also need to engage with it. This will require a commitment from forestry companies to submit only applications which have a realistic chance of being planted, to ensure all applications are of the required standard and quality, and to submit NISs in accordance with the guidance provided.

I am more than aware 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.

The issue of third-party appeals is an independent process run by the Forestry Appeals Committee and which is independent of my Department.

Architectural Heritage

818. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the grants available for old farm buildings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14952/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): The GLAS Traditional Farm Buildings Scheme funds the restoration and preservation of traditional farm buildings and structures of significant heritage value and which are conserved for agricultural use. The scheme is administered by the Heritage Council on behalf of the Department during the lifetime of the current Rural Development Programme 2014-2020.

One of the conditions of entry to the scheme is that a farmer must have a GLAS contract with my Department. The applicant must also own the building or the related structure for which funding is sought or be acting with the permission of the owner.

€1.25 million was allocated in the 2020 budget. The grants range between €4,000 and €25,000 and cover up to 75% of the cost of the works.

The closing date for the receipt of applications for the 2020 Scheme was 18th February 2020 and eligible applicants were chosen on a competitive basis.

The Heritage Council has issued grant offers to successful applicants and it is expected that 80 to 90 projects will be supported this year.

Ministerial Responsibilities

819. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for research and development, farm safety and new market development; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15045/20]

820. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for land use and biodiversity; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15057/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): I propose to take Questions Nos. 819 and 820 together.

I can confirm that my Department is currently making arrangements for the delegation of

functions to the Ministers of State, and once finalised, the details of their responsibilities will be made available on my Department's website.

Ministerial Communications

821. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he has spoken to his counterpart in the Northern Ireland Executive since his appointment. [15064/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): I can confirm that I spoke via telephone conference call with my Northern Ireland counterpart, Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Edwin Poots MLA, last week.

Our conversation was very constructive, and covered north-south trading arrangements post-Brexit, implementation of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol, and the prospects for the wider EU-UK discussions on the future relationship.

Departmental Functions

822. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to re-establish an investigations division in his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15086/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) is the principal regulator of the Agrifood Sector.

Investigations Division is a key element of the Department's enforcement capability, underpinning food safety, quality and traceability standards, which facilitate trade and provide reassurance to consumers and customers.

The Division was established in 2014, as part of an on-going modernisation of the structures of the Department and the wider public service reform process. Its remit includes investigations and enquiries across all areas of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and assisting other Divisions in relation to potential fraud and/or illegality cases. Investigations are carried out with a view to meeting the standard of proof required for prosecution through the courts. The Head of Investigations Division is supported, since 2014, by a small multidisciplinary team of investigators and support staff.

The mission of the Division is:

- To support DAFM, its agencies and other relevant Bodies by providing the capability to have investigations carried out as requested and to ensure that such investigations are carried out to a standard that will withstand legal scrutiny;
- To contribute to DAFM capacity in horizon scanning and risk analysis;
- To support the implementation of control regimes and the development of legislation underpinning these within DAFM and its agencies as required.

Beef Environmental Efficiency Scheme

823. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if an appeal for a beef environmental efficiency programme, BEEP, scheme 2019 will be processed for a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15120/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): The objective of the Beef Environmental Efficiency Programme – Suckler is to further increase economic and environmental efficiency in the suckler herd through better quality data on herd performance, supporting decision making on farm and support of best practice in welfare management.

An application to join this scheme was received from the person named after the application period. The matter has been reviewed and the person named has been accepted into the programme.

Felling Licences

824. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of applications on hand for forestry felling licences that have not been decided to date; the years in which these licences were applied for originally in tabular form; if an economic impact assessment has been carried out on the effect the delay in issuing licences is having on the timber industry; the steps he plans to take to deal with the backlog of applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15126/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): The commencement of the Forestry Act, 2014 in May, 2017 brought about significant changes in the consent process for forestry operations. Felling licences are now valid for up to 10 years and may cover several felling events, such as thinning then clear felling on the same plot. Landowners considering future operations, have the opportunity of applying for a tree felling licence well in advance of any operations taking place.

I am acutely aware that delays in issuing licences has led to difficulties for some in the sector, although of course not all licence are used immediately. 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. 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. My Department's licensing decisions are being confirmed at the Forestry Appeals Committee, which gives confidence in these revised procedures.

My Department now have a project plan for dealing with the current backlog and new applications, which includes significant extra resources as follows:

- Nine new forestry inspectors will be recruited in 2020, and four temporary forestry inspectors have been recruited, to work on licensing.

- Three new ecologists have joined the Department ecology team, with three more to be appointed shortly.

- We have engaged external ecological expertise to help with the backlog of files. Four local ecologists have also been contracted provide extra support. Further, an ecology contract with five new ecologists has been started.

- 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.

The project plan is a targeted, process-driven approach which prioritise files in a manner which will result in an increased number of licences being issued in the short-term and will deliver a return to expected timelines in the longer term. Applicants who have or are prepared to submit a Natura Impact Statement, where appropriate, will be prioritised.

A Project Management Board, with a dedicated Project Manager, will oversee and monitor delivery. There will be a continuous review of the process, in order to effect efficiencies. A communication plan to keep stakeholders fully and regularly informed of progress, with a dedicated central resource to deal with queries, is a key element of the project. While much of the success of the project plan lies with my Department, stakeholders also need to engage with it. This will require a commitment from forestry companies to submit only applications which have a realistic chance of being planted, to ensure all applications are of the required standard and quality, and to submit NISs in accordance with the guidance provided.

I am more than aware 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.

The table below shows applications received, licences issued and applications still outstanding for 2018, 2019 and to 30th June, 2020. Note: the “outstanding” figure applies to applications received in that year which have yet to be licensed.

	2018	2019	2020
Applications received	6,600	3,175	758
Licences issued	3,603	4,098	823
Outstanding	300	1,484	580

Aquaculture Licences

825. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of applications on hand for aquaculture licences; the years that these applications were originally applied for in tabular form; the impact this delay in issuing licences is having on the development of the aquaculture industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15127/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): The detailed information requested by the Deputy will require an extensive examination of my Department’s records and possibly enquiries with other Divisions and Agencies under the aegis of my Department.

The information requested will be forwarded to the Deputy within 14 days.

Departmental Schemes

826. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the schemes available to community groups, agencies or local authorities from his Department to assist in the development of coastal infrastructure such as piers, pontoons and slipways; the maximum amount available under such schemes, including matching contribution amounts required; the timelines and anticipated closing dates for applications for such schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15163/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): 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 development and maintenance of Local Authority owned piers, harbours and slipways rests with each Local Authority in the first instance and their parent Department, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage thereafter.

However, as part of its annual Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme, my Department provides limited funding to assist coastal Local Authorities in carrying out small scale projects for the development and repair of piers, harbours and slipways in their ownership. Between 2010 and 2019, €28.2 million in funding has been provided by my Department under this scheme.

Each year, Local Authorities are invited to submit prioritised lists of projects for consideration to be included in the annual capital programme. All applications for funding made by Local Authorities in respect of qualifying projects are then assessed, taking into account compliance with the criteria of the scheme, the priority attached to each project by the relevant Local Authority, the funding available, and the need to ensure a broad geographical spread of projects. The deadline for receipt of detailed applications under this year's scheme was the 17th of April 2020.

Under this year's programme, funding of €3.1m has been approved to assist 10 coastal Local Authorities undertake and complete 58 development and repair projects on harbours and slipways owned by them. The maximum eligible project cost under this year's scheme is €200,000, with my Department contributing 75% of funding and the relevant Local Authority providing 25%. 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.

Harbour Fees

827. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if consideration will be given to reviewing a charging regime at a facility (detailed supplied). [15246/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): My Department owns, manages and maintains the six State-owned Fishery Harbour Centres, located at Castle-townbere, Dingle, Dunmore East, Howth, Killybegs and Ros An Mhíl. The Fishery Harbour Centres (Rates and Charges) Order 2012 (214 of 2012), which came into effect on the 1st July 2012, sets out the fee schedule for the use of the facilities at each of the six Fishery Harbour Centres. Different rates apply according to the type and nature of the vessel, the different use made of the facilities by the vessel, the size of the vessel and the quantity, value and species of fish landed (where applicable).

Charge 9, Schedule 2 of the order sets an annual rate only for swing moorings of between €200 and €300 per annum depending on the size of the vessel.

However, I assume the deputy is referring to Charge 17, Schedule 2 of the order which sets out the rates for the berthing of yachts and pleasure crafts, and has a summer rate between April and September of €150 per metre in length of the vessel. This charge already allows for monthly, weekly and even shorter stays at lower rates.

As the rates and charges applicable in respect of services are prescribed in the Rates and Charges Order referred to above, changes to the rates would require legislative change and this is not envisaged at present.

Departmental Funding

828. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if there will be an allocation in 2020 to the national reserve; if so, when the allocation will be made; the monetary value of the allocation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15296/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): On 23rd January 2020, my Department announced details regarding the continuation of the National Reserve in 2020, with the provision of funding in the region of €3 million. This funding allocation has been met from the natural replenishment of the fund without the requirement for a linear cut to the value of all Basic Payment Scheme entitlements.

Applications under the 2020 National Reserve were available to the two priority categories of ‘young farmer’ and ‘new entrant to farming’. The closing date for receipt of applications was 15th May 2020. My Department is currently processing the applications submitted. Payments to successful applicants under the 2020 National Reserve are scheduled to commence in early December 2020.

Forestry Sector

829. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the plans in place for a compensation scheme for those who have land affected by the ash dieback disease; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15298/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): My Department introduced a revised reconstitution scheme for plantations affected by Ash Dieback, known as the Reconstitution and Underplanting Scheme (Ash Dieback) or RUS on 10th June.

The revised Scheme offers significant support on top of the €7m already spent since the first support scheme for Ash Dieback was introduced in 2013. The scheme provides a suite of options that will give owners the opportunity to recover the maximum economic value possible

from their affected ash plantations.

Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme

830. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when the results of ANC appeals were released; if all failed applicants were given substantial reasons for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15370/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): Under the current Rural Development Regulation (and subsequent amendments under the Omnibus Regulation), Member States were required to change the approach to the designation of land under the Areas of Natural Constraints Scheme.

This process was a lengthy project, involving protracted technical engagements with the EU DG for Agriculture and Rural Development and the Joint Research Centre in the EU Commission. The technical process was completed in late 2018 and, at that time, further to a series of consultation meetings with key stakeholders, full details of the outcome of the process as regards the eligibility status of the lands in question were published on my Department's website. Some 700 townlands that would have previously been eligible were no longer eligible under the new designation. Over 2,000 townlands became eligible and were eligible to receive a payment for the first time in 2019.

An independently chaired Appeals Committee was appointed to examine any requests received by my Department for a full review on the status of a townland under the 2019 ANC Scheme following the re-designation process.

The first stage of this process was for farmers to lodge an Appeals Notification Form with my Department by the 8th of April 2019. Following receipt of this Notification Form, a letter issued from my Department detailing the reason(s) for the ineligibility of the townland concerned following the re-designation process and offering the opportunity to request a full review of the Department's decision by the Independent Appeals Committee.

Following the completion of the appeal process by the Independent Appeals Committee, letters commenced issuing from my Department the week commencing the 27 April 2020, advising them of the outcome of their appeal. Where an appeal was not successful, farmers were advised of their right to submit an additional appeal to the Office of the Ombudsman.

Harbours and Piers

831. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount allocated to Malinbeg pier, Malinbeg, Glencolmcille, County Donegal to carry out maintenance and upgrade the pier to a safe standard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15388/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): 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.

Malinbeg Pier is owned by Donegal County Council and responsibility for its maintenance and development rests with that Local Authority in the first instance and its parent Department, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage thereafter.

However, as part of its annual Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme, my Department provides limited funding to assist coastal Local Authorities in carrying out small scale projects for the development and repair of piers, harbours and slipways in their ownership. Between 2010 and 2019, €28.2 million in funding has been provided by my Department under this scheme, with Donegal County Council having received funding of € 3.1m during this period.

I am pleased to inform the Deputy that funding of €3.1m has been approved for the Local Authority element of my Department's 2020 Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme. Donegal County Council has secured €433,500 of funding for eleven projects under this year's programme.

One of the approved projects under this year's programme is for upgrade works to be carried out at the slipway in Malinbeg. It is proposed by Donegal County Council to replace the existing electric winch with an electro-hydraulic winch, which is deemed to be more suitable to this location. This project has received funding approval of €22,500 from my Department.

Beef Industry

832. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on the introduction of an independent pricing regulator for the beef industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15407/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): As the Deputy will be aware, there is a commitment in the new Programme for Government to the establishment of a new authority called the National Food Ombudsman (NFO) to enforce the Unfair Trading Practices Directive.

The NFO will have a specific role in analysing and reporting on price and market data in Ireland, but the Deputy should be aware, the Ombudsman will not have a role in determining prices for beef or any other commodity.

Animal Diseases

833. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps he plans to take to ensure all Connemara ponies for sale are tested first for HWSD irrespective of age; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15657/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): The Connemara Pony Breeders Society (CPBS) has been approved by my Department to maintain the Studbook for Connemara Ponies and, in this regard, operates a breeding programme for the breed. Within its breeding programme, the CPBS has identified the presence of Hoof Wall Separation Disease (HWSD) which is caused by a genetic defect that appears to occur only in the Connemara pony breed. Research carried out by the Connemara Pony Breeders Society, in conjunction with Weatherbys, has enabled them to test for the presence of the HWSD gene.

In response to the presence of the problem in the breed, the CPBS has included in its breeding programme, the requirement that all foals born after 1/1/2016 are tested for HWSD and the

result of this test is stamped on the horse's passport. In addition, in 2019, CPBS has offered a discounted rate to test older ponies for HSWD and has stepped up its their awareness campaign among members.

My Department has allocated funding over the past number of years to the CPBS under the Equine Technical Support Scheme to facilitate this project.

EU Regulations

834. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason his Department did not seek to introduce legislation to place those in industry currently responsible for the dispensing of medication from operating as a responsible person under the EU Veterinary Medicinal Products Regulation 2019/6. [15711/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): 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 Regulation's provisions.

Article 103 of the new regulation provides for the retail of veterinary medicinal products by member states. The specific rules will be determined by National law and it is the intention of my Department to provide for Responsible Persons who operate within the Licensed Merchant sector to continue to have a role in the dispensing of veterinary medicinal products as provided for in the current legislation (heretofore).

Animal Culls

835. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of cattle culled in each of the years 2015 to 2019 due to tuberculosis for which compensation was payable under the eradication programme by county in tabular form. [15712/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): The information requested is contained in the attached document.

*Number of cattle culled due to tuberculosis for which compensation was payable under the eradication programme

County	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
CARLOW DVO	157	278	127	72	100
CAVAN DVO	999	615	1,557	1,057	1,290
CLARE DVO	1,545	1,304	1,174	1,329	1,341
CORK NORTH DVO	886	1,453	1,668	2,226	2,292
CORK SOUTH DVO	1,042	1,098	750	785	859
DONEGAL DVO	261	367	318	110	229
DUBLIN DVO	60	75	63	179	180
GALWAY DVO	874	954	948	979	1,114
KERRY DVO	1,014	842	1,065	1,416	1,295

Questions - Written Answers

County	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
KILDARE DVO	148	233	128	180	82
KILKENNY DVO	820	367	490	224	496
LAOIS DVO	425	533	472	673	396
LEITRIM DVO	237	136	238	247	239
LIMERICK DVO	653	835	586	453	333
LONGFORD DVO	152	140	51	196	133
LOUTH DVO	58	156	266	75	154
MAYO DVO	287	234	498	471	393
MEATH DVO	678	1,009	620	831	489
MONAGHAN DVO	538	839	1,098	1,917	1,409
OFFALY DVO	433	480	410	345	472
ROSCOMMON DVO	434	390	407	499	538
SLIGO DVO	310	250	264	450	290
TIPPERARY NORTH DVO	697	914	1,096	1,522	992
TIPPERARY SOUTH DVO	318	519	333	371	409
WATERFORD DVO	273	472	302	414	158
WESTMEATH DVO	493	559	862	725	461
WEXFORD DVO	1,013	600	926	802	819
WICKLOW EAST DVO	659	605	482	547	1,050
WICKLOW WEST DVO	455	575	388	410	335
Total	15,919	16,832	17,587	19,505	18,348

*Notes

Figures taken from the Animal Health Computer System (AHCS). Does not include payments that may have been made manually.

Figures include animals removed following a herd depopulation. Such animals may not have tested positive but were removed for disease eradication purposes.

Proposed Legislation

836. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the timeframe for introducing legislation to appoint a national food ombudsman. [15713/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): The Programme for Government includes a commitment to the establishment of a new authority to be called the National Food Ombudsman to enforce Directive (EU) No. 2019/633 on Unfair Trading Practices.

My Department has been preparing for the transposition of the Unfair Trading Practices Directive into national legislation before the 1 May 2021 deadline. The preparations included the launch of a public consultation process in October 2019 which resulted in over 650 submissions received from individuals, stakeholder organisations and public representatives.

My Department is also in consultation with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment which has responsibility for certain related national legislation, namely the Consumer Protection Act 2007 S.I. No. 35/2016 (Grocery Goods Undertakings) Regulations 2016. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC), under the aegis of that Department, is the enforcement authority for S.I. No. 35/2016.

Following the completion of the required assessment of the legal and operational matters associated with the Directive and the commitment in the Programme for Government, I will be in a better position to advise of the exact timeframe for the establishment of the new office of National Food Ombudsman.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

837. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the timeframe to introduce legislation with regard to the Covid-19 credit guarantee scheme. [15714/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): The new COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme (CGS) falls within the remit of the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, and further details will be announced by him, including with regard to the legislative timetable.

I am pleased that, unlike the previous Credit Guarantee Scheme, my Department's involvement in the design and structure of this new scheme means that farmers and fishers will be able to benefit from the guarantee scheme, along with all other SME borrowers.

Common Agricultural Policy

838. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the position of Ireland in negotiating the future of the CAP takes into consideration the need for local variance within individual states in CAP guidelines to help ensure biodiversity. [15715/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): The new legislative proposals for the Common Agricultural Policy 2021 - 2027 were launched in June 2018 by Commissioner Hogan. The Commission proposals, as drafted, involve significant changes, including in relation to governance, the distribution of direct payments among farmers and the environmental conditionality attaching to such payments. Indeed, three of the nine objectives of the CAP relate to the achievement of a higher level of environment and climate ambition, including in relation to the protection of biodiversity and the preservation of habitats and landscapes.

The proposals provide for additional discretion for Member States in configuring the measures available, within parameters which are laid down in the draft proposals. Taking this balanced approach, the new CAP is intended to provide for appropriate national flexibility while also maintaining a common approach and a level playing field. It is an approach that Ireland supports. The CAP already supports locally-led environmental and other measures and the new arrangements will continue to do so.

Negotiations are continuing under the German Presidency. I can assure the Deputy that I will continue to work closely with the Presidency, my European counterparts and the European Commission to ensure that the next CAP continues to provide necessary support and the best possible outcome for Ireland's farmers and agriculture sector.

Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme

839. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if upcoming tranches of TAMS will include provision for financial supports towards the restoration of derelict farmhouses and other buildings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15716/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): The TAMS II Scheme has been very successful in terms of uptake with the number of approvals that have issued to date exceeding 28,800. All of these approvals represent committed expenditure under the TAMS II measure of the Rural Development Programme 2014 - 2020. Until such time as these approvals are acted upon or expire, the budget for TAMS must include provision for the potential expenditure involved. Current estimates indicate that the total budget of €395m available under TAMS II for the suite of seven measures covering a wide range of investments will be fully spent.

There are no plans, therefore, to introduce additional investment items such as supports towards the restoration of derelict farmhouses and other buildings under TAMS II.

However, the GLAS Traditional Farm Buildings Scheme funds the restoration and preservation of traditional farm buildings and structures of significant heritage value and which are conserved for agricultural use. The scheme is administered by the Heritage Council on behalf of the Department during the lifetime of the current Rural Development Programme 2014-2020.

One of the conditions of entry to the scheme is that a farmer must have a GLAS contract with my Department. The applicant must also own the building or the related structure for which funding is sought or be acting with the permission of the owner.

€1.25 million was allocated in the 2020 budget. The grants range between €4,000 and €25,000 and cover up to 75% of the cost of the works.

The closing date for the receipt of applications for the 2020 Scheme was 18 February 2020 and eligible applicants were chosen on a competitive basis. The Heritage Council has issued grant offers to successful applicants and it is expected that 80 to 90 projects will be supported this year.

Animal Diseases

840. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of poultry flocks impacted by an outbreak of low pathogenic avian influenza in 2020 by county, that will benefit from the one-off financial support scheme announced by him in tabular form; the amount that will be provided in total and on average to each farmer; the basis on which the funds will be distributed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15717/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): The outbreak of the low pathogen H6N1 strain of avian influenza affected 14 poultry flocks in the period between 10 March 2020 and 30 June 2020. All affected flocks were located in County Monaghan. This

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particular strain of avian influenza (subtype H6N1) has no food safety implications, but does impact on flock productivity.

While there is no legal basis for a mandatory compensation scheme under EU legislation in respect of the particular subtype of the disease identified, a once-off financial support scheme has been established. Any of these affected flock owners are eligible to apply and subject to meeting the criteria as laid down in the terms and conditions for this one scheme will receive ex gratia payments at a maximum rate of €10,000 per flock owner. Terms and conditions including application forms are available on my Departments website and applications for the above referenced flock owners will be accepted until the deadline of 31 July 2020.

Full details are at: <https://www.agriculture.gov.ie/farmerschemespayments/otherfarmersschemes/schemeoffinancialassistanceforavianinfluenzaoutbreaksoftheh6n1subtypeinpoultryflocks2020/>

I want to acknowledge that the flock owners in question have taken the correct action in depopulating their flocks for the greater good of the sector. In light of the significant economic impact this has had on their business, I am pleased to be able to provide some assistance towards the costs of depopulation which they have incurred.

Site Acquisitions

841. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department is in discussions or the process of securing additional property for sale or lease in Dublin city at present; the details of such proposals or discussions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15718/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): My Department is not engaged in discussions or the process of securing additional property for sale or lease in Dublin City.

The Office of Public Works has responsibility for managing the State's property portfolio on behalf of Government Departments and Offices and the matter of sourcing or securing any additional property would fall under the remit of that Office.

Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme

842. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason dairy farms are excluded from the TAMS grant in respect of solar panels in view of the fact pig and poultry farms are covered. [15889/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): My Department extended grant aid for the Solar Photovoltaic installation to all farming sectors from the TAMS application date of 6 April 2019 including dairy farms.

This grant aid is available under Animal Welfare Safety and Nutrient Storage Scheme, Young Farmers Capital Investment Scheme and Organics Capital Investment Scheme measures of TAMS II.

Full details of all available grant aided investments can be found on my Department's website.

Ministerial Meetings

843. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he has met representatives of organisations (details supplied); and if not, when he will do so. [15890/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): I am planning to meet later this week the fishing industry representatives from the catching, processing and inshore sectors including the Killybegs Fishermen's Organisation (KFO), the Irish South and West Fish Producers' Organisation (ISWFPO), the Irish South and East Fish Producers' Organisation, the Irish Fish Producers' Organisation (IFPO), the National Inshore Fisheries Forum (NIFF) and the Irish Fish Processors and Exporters Association (IFPEA).

I look forward to working closely with the industry organisations to build a sustainable future for our fishing sector.

Hardship Grant Scheme

844. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to visit the Drumkeeran area in County Leitrim to witness the damage the recent landslide has caused to farmland; if the affected farmers will be given a waiver to their basic payment scheme applications for three to five years in order to reinstate the farmland in view of the fact it was an act of God; if a fund will be put in place to support the farmers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15901/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): I visited Drumkeerin on Monday 13th July to see the situation first-hand and to meet local farmers and public representatives.

The terms and conditions for the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) include provision for force majeure cases, and these provisions would include instances such as the recent bog slide. Where a farmer is concerned that this event might have an impact on their scheme payments, they should contact the Department to inform them of the circumstances of their own case and to provide any available evidence of the impact on their own landholding such as geo-tagged photographs. Farmers affected can write to the Direct Payments Unit, Government Offices, Abbeyleix Road, Portlaoise or ring 076 106 4420. This will ensure that the Department is aware of cases which may be impacted and all such cases will be examined individually.

The BPS is an annual scheme, and thus application is made separately for each year.

Departmental Staff

845. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the estimated amount it would cost in 2021 if nine additional full-time ecologists were recruited for his Department. [15966/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): My Department is the consent authority for forestry licences. As you may be aware, changes have been made to internal Appropriate Assessment Procedures (AAP) in relation to these decisions. 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.

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These findings meant that in order to grant licences which fully meet environmental requirements, fundamental changes to the licensing system were unavoidable and assessment now requires significant ecological input.

In order to deliver on these new requirements, my Department has and is recruiting additional resources including ecologists, as follows:

- Three new permanent ecologists have joined the Department ecology team, with three more to be appointed shortly.

- We have also 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 has been started.

A project plan is now in place for dealing with licence applications and aims to make best use of these resources in order to increase the number of licences issued. We are keeping resources under continuous review to ensure that they are sufficient to deliver the plan.

In terms of the cost of estimated cost of additional full-time ecologists, the first point of the pay scale for ecologists recruited to the Department, including the 2% increase due in October 2020, is €34,651. To employ 9 ecologists for one year based on current salary levels is €311,000.

This figure only represents the cost for the year 2021 and would obviously rise incrementally in subsequent years if the recruited ecologists were to be retained.

Sheepmeat Sector

846. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the approximate number of lambs imported in each of the years 2017 to 2019 and to date in 2020; his views on whether this undermines the sustainability of the Irish market in lamb; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15971/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): As a member of the European Union, Ireland is part of a single EU market that permits trade between member states without tariffs or quantitative limits. The Intra EU movement of animals is recorded on the Trade Control and Expert System (TRACES). The data provided below was extracted from the TRACES database and represents sheep of all ages imported into Ireland for all movement purposes.

As the Deputy will appreciate, as Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, it is not my role to comment upon commercial decisions taken by private entities in an open market. It should however be noted that, for the sheep sector, Irish average price and slaughter volumes in 2020 to date are above 2019 levels.

Year	Quantity
2020 (to 01/07/2020)	200,123
2019	461,552
2018	521,798
2017	492,776

Data from the 2019 sheep and goat census returns record that a total of 3.81 million sheep were kept in the country at the end December 2019 and approximately 2.8 million sheep were slaughtered in Ireland in 2019.

Trade Agreements

847. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the Mercosur trade deal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15972/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): A political agreement was announced in June 2019, marking the end of a twenty-year period of negotiations on the EU-Mercosur Free Trade Agreement. The agreement is currently undergoing a process of legal scrubbing and translation, with the Commission expecting to bring the matter to the EU Trade Council in the final quarter of 2020.

The provisional application of those aspects of the Agreement which the Commission has exclusive competence for (including trade) will require the agreement of the Trade Council (Qualified Majority Voting) and ratification by the European Parliament. If agreement is secured it would see it brought in on a phased basis over six years. The formal ratification process for the wider Agreement - will require ratification by individual Member States, because it contains elements which fall under both EU competence and Member State competence.

However, in the meantime, we have an opportunity to review the draft final report of the “Sustainability Impact Assessment” on the agreement, which was published on 8 July 2020. The Commission engaged the London School of Economics to carry out this report, which is at present undergoing thorough analysis by officials in my Department. The outcome of the study will inform Ireland’s approach to the EU Trade Council.

The EU study is being augmented at national level by the whole-of-Government review announced by former Taoiseach Leo Varadkar. The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, in collaboration with this Department, commissioned the Implement Consulting Group to carry out an Economic and Sustainability Impact Assessment (ESIA) for Ireland. This report is due in August 2020.

Brexit Supports

848. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if an application for a BEAM scheme payment will be processed for a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15991/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): An application under the BEAM scheme was submitted under appeal by the person named on the 19th August 2019 as they believed they had animals eligible for payment under the scheme. The tag numbers provided by the person named as part of the appeal were reviewed by officials from my Department and it was determined that they did not meet the eligibility criteria for payment under the scheme.

A letter detailing this decision issued to the person named on the 7th October 2019. This letter informed them of their right to appeal this outcome to the independent Agriculture Appeals Office.

Fur Farming

849. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on a matter regarding a farm (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a

statement on the matter. [16106/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): My Department is in the process of preparing a Bill to provide for the phased introduction of a ban on fur farming which will include a prohibition on mink farming.

Along with animal welfare considerations, social and economic aspects in relation to the industry need to be taken into account. The Bill will make it illegal for any new fur farms to be established and will put in place phase out arrangements for the small number of current operators. This will allow for an orderly wind down of the sector and allow time for employees to find alternative opportunities. The Programme for Government 2020 contains a clear commitment regarding the prohibition of fur farming and Department officials are currently preparing the appropriate draft heads of a Bill to facilitate the achievement of this objective with a view to seeking Government authority at an early date.

Felling Licences

850. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a decision will be issued on a felling licence application submitted in May 2018 by a person (details supplied) in County Galway; the reason for the delay in making a decision on this application despite assertions made by his predecessor that procedures were being put in place early in 2020 to process such applications; when these procedures will be put in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16110/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): The felling licence application for the person named is within the Maumturk Mountains SAC (code 002008) and upstream from Lough Corrib SAC (000297). Potential adverse impacts of the proposed clear fell operations on the Qualifying Interests of the SACs could not be ruled out and, therefore, it was determined that a Natura Impact Statement (NIS) was required.

A letter requesting the NIS and detailing the information required was issued to the person named and their forester on 21st May. The NIS is now awaited and my Department will process the tree felling licence application when this document is received.

Public Inquiries

851. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of tribunals, public investigations and commissions of investigations in process; the length of time each has been under way; when each will conclude; the cost to date of each; and the estimated cost of each at completion. [16132/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Barry Cowen): I wish to advise the Deputy that there are currently no tribunals, public investigations or commissions of investigations in process in my Department.

Departmental Funding

852. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the grants available to childcare centres that hold community and charitable status; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15023/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): My Department operates a number of funding programmes, for which all Tusla registered childcare services are eligible to apply, including those that are community based or hold a charitable status. These programmes are summarised below:

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme is a free pre-school programme available to all children within the eligible age range. All children meeting the minimum age requirement of 2 years and 8 months are eligible for a full two programme years. The programme is provided three hours per day, five days per week, 38 weeks per year over the two years.

Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP)

This programme provides childcare funding support, targeting low income families. This is no longer available to new entrants following the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme.

Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) Programmes

These programmes provide childcare funding support for parents participating in eligible Education and Training Boards /Solas vocational training courses, Community Employment (CE) programmes, or returning to employment. This is no longer available to new entrants following the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme.

National Childcare Scheme

Families may be entitled to subsidies under the new National Childcare Scheme, which opened in November 2019. The Scheme comprises two types of subsidies a universal subsidy and an income related subsidy. Information on the NCS can be found at www.ncs.gov.ie.

Programme Support Payments

A Programme Support Payment is paid annually to all service providers who have children registered on one of the above funding programmes. Payments are issued on a per capita basis. The total PSP funding for the 2019/20 programme year was €19.3million.

Capital Grants

The Capital Grant Programme provides grants to successful applicant services to enable them to expand or to improve their premises. The Capital Grant programme budget for 2020 was €7.2 million. This was increased to €14.2million in response to Covid-19 and all services which have at least one child registered on any Department funded programme is eligible to apply for a grant.

Additional supports for community services

In addition to the above funding which is available to all providers, community services have access to a sustainability fund of €2.2million, which they can apply for as part of sustainability support from the Department.

If services require further information and guidance on any of my Departments’ childcare funding programmes I would advise them to contact their local County Childcare Committee (CCC). Contact details for CCCs can be found at www.myccc.ie.

Early Years Sector

853. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the status of the national roll-out of the baby box scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15110/20]

868. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if a report on the pilot baby box scheme will be commissioned; if so, when it will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15109/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I propose to take Questions Nos. 853 and 868 together.

Baby Boxes for newborns are to be piloted under First 5 A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028. Piloting Baby Boxes is just one initiative which is part of a wide ranging strategy addressing various aspects of the lives of children from birth to age five including supports for parents to balance working and caring, developments in early learning and care and health initiatives.

The gift of the Baby Box is intended as a welcome from the State for a new arrival to a family and an acknowledgement of this very significant moment for parents. The universal distribution of Baby Boxes also reflects an important equality principle that each child is given something of equal value at the start of their life. The concept of Baby Boxes originates in Finland (and has been implemented in a number of other countries) and consists of a package of items to assist with the transition to parenthood. The pilot will undertake research and consultation to determine items for inclusion in the pack and these may include safety items, baby clothes and toys to support early development and books to foster a love of reading from infancy.

The distribution of a Baby Box also offers the opportunity to communicate important child development and safety messages to parents as well as an early opportunity to link families in with support services if required. This is consistent with the principle of progressive universalism whereby all families receive something universally, but where there are additional needs, extra supports are provided.

Key objectives with the Baby Box and linked communications will include support for parent-infant bonding, information on baby development and early learning, advice and support for breastfeeding and promotion of infant health and safety.

Baby Boxes will be piloted in parallel with Book Bags to support early literacy and the home learning environment. Book Bags are packs including books for children and other resources to support reading and learning. It is intended that Book Bags would be made available free of charge to families with young children at key points in a child’s life such as infancy, the transition to pre-school and the transition to primary school.

A research partner will be appointed, following competitive tender, to support work on the baby box pilot. The research partner will oversee focus groups and/or consultations for the selection of items for the box. The implementation of the pilot including delivery channels and selection and registration of participants will also be evaluated by the research partner. There will be a significant emphasis in the pilot on consultation and engagement with parents and of evaluation of the impact of such measures, including cost-benefit analysis, with a view to determining whether the baby box pilot initiative is suitable for wider roll-out. The results of the evaluation will be published as a report some months after the final distribution of the boxes. This will allow for a period of time for participants to fully utilise items in the boxes before reporting on their experience.

The scoping phase of the pilot began in late 2019/early 2020 and a working group will be convened in Q4 2020 to plan for the pilot implementation.

There are some baby box schemes already in operation via maternity hospitals and otherwise in different parts of the country but my Department is not involved in funding or coordinating these.

Ministerial Meetings

854. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if he will meet a group (details supplied) regarding funding. [15350/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): My Department provides funding to Scouting Ireland on a national basis under the Youth Services Grant Scheme. In 2020 Scouting Ireland was provided with a grant of €1,135,930. My Department cannot deal directly with individual scout groups, or indeed with local groups from any of the national youth organisations, as this would be unmanageable from an administrative and governance perspective.

I would strongly recommend that the scout group mentioned by the Deputy engage directly with Scouting Ireland in the first instance.

Schools Data

855. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if statistics on the ethnicity of students expelled and suspended from all schools is available; and his views on his Department recording such statistics to ensure that potential biases can be adequately monitored. [15359/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): As this is an operational matter I have asked Tusla, the Child and Family Agency to reply directly to the Deputy.

State Pension (Contributory)

856. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the reason foster carers employed by the HSE cease to be entitled to contributory pensions for their years of fostering; the reason that many of them are not advised of same; if the HSE will consult the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to create a pathway for such an entitlement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15497/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Pension contributions are governed by the employer and employee relationship and contractual arrangements. Similarly, where employment ceases any associated impact on pension rights may be communicated with regard to this framework. The determination of what constitutes employment for the purposes of calculating contributions for the State pension(s) is a matter for the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

To assist foster carers in their role, foster carers receive the Foster Care Allowance in respect of each child they are caring for. At €325 per week per child under 12 years of age and €352 per

week per child aged 12 and over, this allowance is a significant fiscal support.

This allowance is not a salary. It is a payment made in respect of the child to allow foster carers to meet all of the child's daily living needs including food, clothing, basic travel, education costs and hobbies and sporting activities. It is tax free and is not considered as means for Social Welfare purposes. Therefore, it can be availed of by foster carers regardless of their income or employment status. It is thus a very flexible support which reflects the variety in the life and circumstances of the thousands of people in Ireland who are foster carers.

In addition to the allowance, foster carers receive a number of targeted supports to ensure they continue to function as a recognised and valued part of the alternative care system. Key elements of this support include a link social worker, access to training and support group meetings and the allocation of a social worker for each child in care. In addition, Tusla provides funding to the Irish Foster Care Association, which offers a range of supports to carers, including advocacy, mediation, training and a phone advice service.

Changes to the law in relation to credits for pension purposes are a matter for the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

Departmental Functions

857. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs which Department will have responsibility for youth affairs. [15724/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The responsibility for youth affairs remains with my Department. While I am aware of some concerns, I can assure the Deputy that, despite ‘Youth Affairs’ not appearing in the title of the Department, it very much remains central to the remit of my Department.

Funding to the youth sector has been protected through the current period of financial challenge and I will strive to ensure that the profile of young people and their needs remains high throughout my time in office. I am particularly keen to ensure that the needs of vulnerable, marginalised and disadvantaged young people are taken into account, with specific consideration of how these needs have been impacted or exacerbated by Covid-19 and the resulting restrictions.

My officials and I will continue to work closely with sectoral representatives and young people themselves to ensure that strategy and resourcing is planned carefully to support the needs of young people in an optimum way.

Childcare Services

858. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of providers that opened on 29 June 2020. [14692/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Early learning and care services who were reopening after the Covid closure were not obliged to notify my Department on the day that they reopened. Information on service reopening is being compiled by way of local surveys being carried out by the County Childcare Committees through returns made to Pobal, who administer funded schemes on behalf of my Department.

Pobal have indicated that by close of business on Friday 10 July 1,324 childcare services had reopened. This compares well with summer of 2019, when 1, 800 services were open, as a

significant number of services close for the summer months.

I expect that additional service providers will reopen over the remaining weeks of the summer.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

859. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if the providers that did not open on 29 June 2020 will continue to receive the temporary wage childcare subsidy scheme to allow them to keep staff enrolled. [14693/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): On 10 June 2020, a major funding package was announced to facilitate the reopening of Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare services. Included in this reopening package are:

- A once-off Reopening Support Payment for DCYA funded providers opening between 29 June and early September.

- A once-off COVID-19 capital grant for DCYA-funded providers opening between 29 June and early September.

- Resumption of all DCYA childcare funding programmes which amount to approximately €600m per annum.

Alongside this, eligible services will continue to have access to the Revenue operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS).

In total, Government is providing a €75m package of funding for reopening. The suite of funding measures within this package will run from 29 June to 23 August 2020.

These measures succeed the DCYA Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS) which was introduced as a temporary and time limited emergency measure to support the childcare sector during the closure period required by the COVID-19 crisis. The TWSCS was ended on 26 June.

The DCYA will review the operation of these funding measures in July and will use this information to inform the funding model from 24 August onwards.

The funding package aims to support providers to reopen, staff to remain in the sector, parents to resume work, and children to benefit from quality Early Learning and Care and School Aged Childcare.

Departmental Functions

860. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if responsibility for direct provision has been transferred to his Department. [14694/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Detailed discussions between officials at my Department and at the Department of Justice are ongoing with regard to the transfer of functions between both Departments.

Functions relating to Equality, Disability, Domestic Violence and Direct Provision are transferring to my Department under the Programme for Government. These are very significant

policy and operational areas and I want to ensure that the transfer is conducted in an effective and timely manner. In order to achieve this, officials are examining the relevant functions, legislation, funding and staffing involved. My intention is for this business to be concluded as soon as possible and for the Transfer of Functions Order to be then completed.

Childcare Services

861. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if he will address a matter regarding childcare facilities (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14783/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): On 10 June 2020, I announced a major funding package to facilitate the reopening of Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare services. Included in this reopening package are:

- A once-off Reopening Support Payment for DCYA funded providers opening between 29 June and early September.

- A once-off COVID-19 capital grant for DCYA-funded providers opening between 29 June and early September.

- Resumption of all DCYA childcare funding programmes which amount to approximately €600m per annum.

Alongside this, eligible services will continue to have access to the Revenue operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS).

In total, Government is providing a €75m package of funding for reopening. The suite of funding measures within this package will run from 29 June to 23 August 2020.

These measures succeed the DCYA Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS) which was introduced as a temporary and time limited emergency measure to support the childcare sector during the closure period required by the COVID-19 crisis. The TWSCS was ended on 26 June.

The DCYA will review the operation of these funding measures in July and will use this information to inform the funding model from 24 August onwards.

The funding package aims to support providers to reopen, staff to remain in the sector, parents to resume work, and children to benefit from quality Early Learning and Care and School Aged Childcare.

Ministerial Responsibilities

862. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if he will provide a copy of the departmental briefings received by him and each Minister of State at his Department on taking up their roles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14797/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): My Department will shortly arrange for publication of the brief, as compiled by the Department of Children Youth Affairs, that was provided to me on my appointment.

It is my understanding that the Department of Health will publish any briefing that has been

provided to the Minister of State with responsibility for Disability.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

863. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if a crèche (details supplied) is receiving subsidies; if it is eligible for same in view of the fact that at the beginning of July 2020 it announced an increase in its prices to parents, which is not in line with subsidies announced during the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14844/20]

864. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the funding provided to a facility (details supplied) to allow it to reopen on 29 June 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15018/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I propose to take Questions Nos. 863 and 864 together.

On 10 June 2020, my predecessor announced a major funding package to facilitate the reopening of early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) services. In accordance with the Government Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, and guided by the expert advice of the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HSPC), ELC and SAC services can resume from 29 June. Government has committed a €75m package of funding for reopening services over the summer months. This substantial investment recognises the important role that the ELC and SAC sector plays in the societal and economic infrastructure of the country.

The new funding package contains four significant elements:

- A once-off Reopening Support Payment (RSP) for DCYA-funded service providers opening between 29 June and early September.
- A once-off COVID-19 capital grant for DCYA-funded service providers opening between 29 June and early September.
- Continued access for eligible service providers to the Revenue-operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS)
- Resumption of DCYA ELC and SAC programmes. NCS, CCSP and TEC will be available again for children attending ELC and SAC services from 29 June.

In developing the funding package, my Department recognises that a reduced number of children are likely to attend ELC and SAC services in the initial weeks of reopening. This funding package is tailored to allow providers to operate with potentially less parental income and to assist in meeting the possible costs associated with complying with public health requirements.

Pobal has informed my Department that the service in question has signed up for the RSP and COVID-19 Capital Grant, and will continue to operate CCSP and NCS.

It is a condition of the RSP scheme that participating services must apply the Registered Fees List that was in place on March 12th 2020, without amendments, for the duration of the scheme. Where possible services are requested to avoid charging fees, deposits or other measures to hold places creating a strain for families in difficult circumstances. If a service provider feels that these measures are necessary, then they should be as minimal as possible.

My Department takes compliance with scheme rules seriously, and will work with Pobal

to institute checks on service providers participating in this funding package. This includes following-up where a potential breach of scheme rules, as in this instance, is brought to my Department's or Pobal's attention. If the Deputy has further information that may be of assistance, my officials will review it and consider further action as appropriate.

Early Childhood Care and Education

865. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the action being taken to assist playschools offering ECCE placements to reopen and remain open; if ECCE placements for children whose schools have been forced to close will be provided in other centres; and if assistance will be provided to parents and schools in order to ensure that all those needing an ECCE placement will be accommodated. [15029/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): My Department recently announced a €75 million package of funding for reopening services over the summer months. This substantial investment recognises the important role that the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) sector plays in the societal and economic infrastructure of the country.

The new funding package contains a number of significant elements including:

- A once-off reopening support payment for DCYA-funded providers opening between 29 June and early September.

- A once-off COVID-19 capital grant for DCYA-funded providers opening between 29 June and early September.

- Continued access for eligible providers to the Revenue-operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS).

Services offering the ECCE programme, which will reopen in late August or early September, are eligible to apply for both the capital grant and the reopening support payment. Such services may also be eligible to continue to avail of the TWSS.

If a service provider is facing difficulties in reopening they can apply to their local County Childcare Committee (CCC) who can provide them with expert advice and support. Services which are operated by community non-for-profit providers can also access sustainability funding from my Department.

If a parent needs assistance in finding a ECCE place for their child, they can approach their local CCC for advice on ECCE options in their area. Contact details of all CCCs can be found on www.myccc.ie.

Ministerial Responsibilities

866. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for disability; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15046/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): Detailed discussions between my Department and the Department of Health are ongoing with regard to the transfer of functions between both Departments.

The Minister of State with Responsibility for Disability is currently working directly with Department of Health officials in order to ensure a fuller understanding of the issues prior to its transfer to my Department. This is a significant and complex policy and operational area with an associated budget of over €2 billion. It is important that we take the time to fully understand what is involved and what the key priorities are.

As soon as the Transfer of Functions Order for this area is completed, I will immediately arrange with Government for a Delegation of Ministerial Functions Order.

Childcare Services

867. **Deputy Malcolm Noonan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if a decision not to reopen an application for funding for a childcare community facility (details supplied) will be reviewed. [15097/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): My Department is aware of the case mentioned and have previously been in contact with both Pobal and the service concerned regarding the circumstances of this case.

In a letter to the service concerned from my Department on the 27th November 2019, it was clarified that Pobal initially issued correspondence to the service on 26th October 2018 querying an error surrounding the submission of the component certificates and requesting a re-submission of the application with the correct documents. This query was not responded to.

Further to this, in April 2019, a general message was sent by Pobal to all services with a queried status on their higher capitation application. Pobal received an initial response from the service enquiring as to why their higher capitation status was queried. Pobal replied on 25th April 2019 to the service explaining what additional information was required. This message was not responded to and the application was not amended within the programme year which closed in late June 2019.

Pobal confirmed that the application was re-submitted on the 30th August 2019 but as this was well outside of the submission period, the application was declined. Upon an inquiry by the service, Pobal referred the case to my Department who advised Pobal to maintain the original decision due to the fact that the service did not address the outstanding issues within the programme year.

It must be noted that for applications submitted in the 2018/2019 programme year, significant additional flexibility was afforded by Pobal, allowing services until the 2nd August 2019 to address any outstanding issues with their Higher Capitation applications. Services were informed of this extension through the relevant channels.

Whilst my Department understands the pressures on service providers, the responsibility for ensuring applications are submitted correctly and on time lies with the service. Further, the documents requested by Pobal should have been readily available to the service as they would have been required for any applications made in previous years and are also required to be on-site for the purposes of inspection.

Question No. 868 answered with Question No. 853.

Early Childhood Care and Education

869. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if the case of a person (details supplied) will be reviewed.; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15323/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) programme is a free universal two-year pre-school programme which is available to all children within the eligible age range.

The programme is available to all children who have turned 2 years and 8 months of age before September 1st of the year they will be starting ECCE.

With regard to the child referred to by the Deputy, he does not meet the age criteria for ECCE support in September 2020. However, his parents will be eligible for either a universal or an income assessed subsidy under the National Childcare Scheme (NCS).

Universal Subsidies are available to all families with children under 3 years old. They are also available to families with children over 3 years who have not yet qualified for the free pre-school programme (ECCE). This subsidy is not means tested and provides 50c per hour towards the cost of a registered childcare place for a maximum of 40 hours per week.

Income Assessed Subsidies are available to families with children aged between 24 weeks and 15 years. This subsidy is means tested and will be calculated based on the parents’ individual circumstances. The rate will vary depending on the level of family income, the child’s age and educational stage, and the number of children in the family.

More information on the scheme can be found on *ncs.gov.ie*.

Early Childhood Care and Education

870. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if he will accommodate a child (details supplied) on the ECCE scheme for another year. [15344/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): My Department has not received an application for an additional year of ECCE for the child referred to by the Deputy.

If the parents or the service provider wish to make an application they should forward it to my Department by email to *eyqueries@dca.gov.ie*.

Guardians Ad Litem

871. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs when he will bring forward the guardian ad litem Bill. [15520/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2019 is an important piece of legislation which seeks to provide for much-needed reform of guardian ad litem (GAL) arrangements. Its objective is to regulate the existing system of GAL appointments and to extend the system so that GALs can be made available to a larger number of children on a more equitable basis. It provides a statutory basis for a nationally organised and managed service to ensure that a high quality and sustainable service is provided into the future.

The Bill fell with the dissolution of the 32nd Dáil in January.

I am pleased to note that the proposed reform enjoys broad support and I am determined to progress this legislation as quickly as possible. However, I also intend to take this opportunity to examine some issues raised by stakeholders and to ensure that I am fully satisfied with the proposed Bill before introducing it.

Children in Care

872. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs his views on the removal of children from their breastfeeding mothers at birth by Tusla (details supplied). [15608/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The Deputy will be aware that I cannot comment on an individual case.

Tusla receives children into care when it is necessary to ensure their safety, welfare and development

In the event of a child or an unborn child requiring safe care which is assessed as not being available from within the family, Tusla is obliged to consider, together with the parents and sometimes the Court, how best to provide for an alternative person to provide care. If the parents can agree an alternative safe carer with Tusla, then Tusla will review this, and may develop an agreement for that person(s) to become the primary carer, until such time as the child’s own parent(s) are able to demonstrate that changes are in place to allow for them to provide the necessary safe care. If, however, the parent(s) cannot agree how to do this, it is sometimes necessary to involve the Court to adjudicate on such a decision. In all such cases, under the Child Care Act, the best interests of the child must be the paramount consideration.

All parents whose children are in care are entitled to make applications for family contact (known as access) and the needs of the child, including breastfeeding infants, inform plans for family contact. Access arrangements may also be adjudicated if no mutual agreement is reached between the parent(s) and Tusla.

Departmental Functions

873. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if the revised organisational chart for his Department will be provided. [15720/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Power to transfer functions from one Minister/Department to another and to rename Departments is vested in the Government under section 6 of the Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) Act 1939.

Preparatory work for the transfer of functions and progressing the legislative requirements is ongoing. A revised organisational chart will be made available as soon as the required legal and logistical work has been concluded.

Early Years Sector

874. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the

number of early years professionals by grade who earned below the living wage in 2019. [15784/20]

875. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the estimated cost of raising the rate of pay of early years professionals to at least the living wage of €12.30 per hour. [15785/20]

876. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the estimated cost of raising the rate of pay of all early years professionals to at least €15 per hour. [15786/20]

879. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the staff turnover rate in full day care services per year. [15789/20]

880. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the staff turnover rate in the early years sector per year. [15790/20]

881. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of early years services that have a staff turnover rate greater than 80% per year. [15791/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I propose to take Questions Nos. 874 to 876, inclusive, and 879 to 881, inclusive, together.

According to the Living Wage Technical Group, the “living wage” in Ireland in 2019 was €12.30 per hour. Although the average wage in the Early Learning and Care sector in 2019 was €12.55, as per Pobal’s Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report for the 2018/2019 programme year, wages vary, particularly according to staff role in the service.

The table, taken from Pobal’s Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report for 2018/2019, shows the average wages of early learning and care practitioners in 2019 by job description and qualification level.

Job title	NFQ Level 4	NFQ Level 5	NFQ- Level 6	NFQ- Level 7	NFQ- Level 8	NFQ Level9/10	No relevant qualification	Total
Centre manager	€15.14	€14.42	€15.20	€16.08	€15.99	€17.19	€15.92	€15.56
Deputy manager	€12.53	€13.09	€13.80	€14.78	€14.65	€15.38	€13.67	€14.00
Early years assistant (ECCE)	€12.52	€11.50	€11.83	€12.08	€12.02	€11.98	€11.78	€11.72
Early years assistant (non-ECCE)	€11.44	€10.98	€11.18	€11.45	€11.62	€15.41	€11.19	€11.15
Relief / cover	€11.42	€10.79	€11.34	€11.76	€11.55	N/a	€10.60	€11.03
Room leader (ECCE)	€11.50	€11.71	€12.99	€13.98	€13.38	€14.10	€12.60	€13.24

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Job title	NFQ Level 4	NFQ Level 5	NFQ- Level 6	NFQ- Level 7	NFQ- Level 8	NFQ Level9/10	No relevant qualification	Total
Room leader (non-ECCE)	€16.33	€11.58	€12.25	€12.49	€12.85	€14.09	€12.25	€12.17
Total	€12.25	€11.42	€12.63	€13.93	€13.45	€15.18	€11.81	€12.55

As the State is not the employer, my Department does not determine the wages of staff working in early learning and care settings. However, based on figures available to my Department, of approximately 26,000 staff working directly with children, it is estimated that 60% (or 15,600) are paid below €12.30 per hour and 40% (or 10,400) are paid €12.30 or more. It is estimated that 83% (or 21,647) of staff working directly with children are paid below €15 hour per hour and 17% (or 4,353) are paid €15 hour or more hour.

On this basis, it can be estimated that the annual cost of raising the wages of all early learning and care practitioners to at least €12.30 per hour would be approximately €30 million. This figure represents an average increase of 12% in gross pay. The additional cost to employers for this in terms of employer PRSI and holiday pay would be €6m – bringing the total cost to €36m.

The annual cost of paying €15 hour per hour to staff currently paid below this rate is estimated to be €103 million. This estimate assumes that the number of hours worked remains unchanged and represents an average increase of 30% in gross pay. The additional cost to employers for this in terms of Employer PRSI and holiday pay would be €21m – bring a total cost of this to €124m.

The average overall turnover rate for full-time only services per year is as follows:

- 2018/2019 – 40.17%
- 2017/2018 – 46.37%
- 2016/2017 – 36.79%

According to Pobal's Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report for the 2018/2019 programme year, the average overall turnover rate was 23.4%. When broken down, this shows that 20% of services lost 1 member of staff, 14% lost 2 or 3 members of staff and a further 7% lost more than 3 staff members. It is important to note that 59% of services retained all of their staff members.

For the 2017/2018 programme year the figures are similar. In that year, the overall turnover rate was 24.7%, with 23% of services losing 1 member of staff, 14% losing 2 or 3 members of staff and 6% losing more than 3 staff. In this year, 57% of services indicated that they retained all of their staff.

For the year 2016/2017, the overall turnover rate was 28.2%, showing that the overall turnover rate has improved slightly. A breakdown of the figures for this year is not available. Further, there is no similar data on previous programme years.

In terms of the percentage of services who recorded a staff turnover rate greater than 80% per year, this data is not available but would be highly dependent on the size of each service. Such a rate would be outside the average rates which are more representative of the overall situation experienced in the sector.

Early Years Sector

877. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the total income for the early years' sector from State spending and parental spending. [15787/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): My Department does not record parental spending in the early years sector.

Data from the Independent Review of the Costs indicates that approximately, 42% of service income is from parental fees with the remainder (i.e. 58%) of income provided by the State.

My Department funds childcare providers through subsidy and grant schemes. The subsidy schemes, which are administered by Pobal, include ECCE, the National Childcare Scheme, CCSP and TEC. In addition, Programme Support Payments are made to providers each year, based on the number of children they have registered on each scheme. Capital grants are available annually, and providers are invited to apply for a grant under a competitive process.

All schemes, other than the capital grant programme, are operated on a programme year basis, which opens in late August. The 2018/19 Programme year ran from 27 August 2018 to 23 August 2019. The capital grant programme is operated on a calendar year basis.

For the 2018 /19 programme year, the last programme year for which full information is available, the total income paid to childcare providers under all Department funding schemes and programmes was €488.6million. As the budget for childcare increased in 2019/ 2020, and the number of services remained relatively stable, this amount will have increased. It is important to draw attention to the wide range which lies behind the average; the range varies from services with less than 10 part-time children to services with over 200 children, many of whom are full time.

Separate data has indicated that, on average, services receive 78% of their income from the State (this includes a large number of services which are ECCE only). Data also indicates that of all income earned by providers in the sector, 58% comes from the State, with the balance coming from parental income. This data is based on 2017/ 2018 income and both State investment and parental fees have risen since then.

Childcare Services

878. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the average amount of income a childcare provider receives from the State. [15788/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): My Department funds childcare providers through subsidy and grant schemes. The subsidy schemes, which are administered by Pobal, include ECCE, the National Childcare Scheme, CCSP and TEC. In addition, Programme Support Payments are made to providers each year, based on the number of children they have registered on each scheme. Capital grants are available annually, and providers are invited to apply for a grant under a competitive process.

All schemes, other than the capital grant programme, are operated on a programme year basis, which opens in late August. The 2018/19 Programme year ran from 27 August 2018 to 23 August 2019. The capital grant programme is operated on a calendar year basis.

For the 2018 /19 programme year, the last programme year for which full information is available, the total income paid to childcare providers under all Department funding schemes

and programmes was €488.6million. This equates to an average of €108,600 in State funding for each provider in 2018/2019 Programme Year. As the budget for childcare increased in 2019/2020, and the number of services remained relatively stable, this amount will have increased. It is important to draw attention to the wide range which lies behind the average; the range varies from services with less than 10 part-time children to services with over 200 children, many of whom are full time.

Separate data has indicated that, on average, services receive 78% of their income from the State (this includes a large number of services which are ECCE only). Data also indicates that of all income earned by providers in the sector, 58% comes from the State, with the balance coming from parental income. This data is based on 2017/ 2018 income and both State investment and parental fees have risen since then.

Questions Nos. 879 to 881, inclusive, answered with Question No. 874.

Early Years Sector

882. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the income of early years providers received from the State and parents in July and August 2019. [15792/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The Department has estimated from analysis conducted by Crowe that State subsidies represent 58% of the total income for the early learning and care and school age care sector, with the remaining 42% coming from parental fees. This is spread over a 12 month period and can vary from month to month.

My Department operates a number of funding schemes which subsidise early learning and care and school-age childcare fees, either partly or in full. These subsidy schemes, which are administered by Pobal, include ECCE, the National Childcare Scheme, CCSP and TEC. My Department also funds capital grants and Programme Support Payments to providers, which are administered by Pobal.

The funding allocated to providers in July and August 2019, for the delivery of programmes in those months, including CCSP and TEC (for service delivery in July and August), ECCE (for service delivery in the last week of August) and capital and PSP payments in both months is as follows:

July 2019: €13.6million

August 2019: €16.3million

It is not possible to state the exact amount of income to private providers from parental fees in the months of July and August.

Child and Family Agency

883. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the protocols for notifying a parent that he or she is under investigation as a risk to his or her child; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15833/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): 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.

Child and Family Agency

884. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the number of parents per annum referred by Tusla for psychiatric assessment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15834/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): 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.

Child Abuse

885. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if Tusla will be required to publish data on child abuse cases, including the total number of cases investigated, the number of cases in which abuse was found and the number of unfounded cases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15835/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): 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.

National Childcare Scheme

886. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if guidance will be provided for parents attempting to re-register for the national childcare scheme online but who are unable to do so in view of the fact it requires a MyGovID account and public services card, which they have been unable to obtain in light of the closure of Intreo offices due to Covid-19; if the missed subsidy will be refunded; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15836/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Parents whose children were availing of the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) before childcare services closed on 12 March do not need to make a new application arising from the re-registration process.

Those parents should contact their childcare service to make arrangements for their child’s return to childcare if they have not already done so. The services can re-register the child using the same award once that award hasn’t expired. Applicants whose awards have expired will already have been informed of this and the steps to renew their award. All of this cohort have MyGovID accounts already.

For completely new applicants who already hold a Public Services Card and a basic MyGovID account, they can still create a MyGovID verified account, and thereby complete an online application for the National Childcare Scheme. Details on how to do this can be found by logging into a MyGovID basic account, available at www.mygovid.ie.

For new applicants who may be unable to follow this process, they can apply for the National Childcare Scheme without obtaining a Public Services Card, by completing a paper ap-

plication form by post. For information on how to apply by post, parents can contact the Parent Support Centre on 01 906 8530, Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm.

Parents will not be reimbursed for any period before they are awarded a childcare subsidy. It has always been communicated by my Department that subsidy awards are payable from the week they are claimed, and not the date of application. It is a key aspect of the scheme that all claims are paid in arrears based on the attendance of a child. As such, the child must be registered with a childcare provider and the provider must confirm that attendance. This is a key financial and governance control to ensure we are maximising the benefits of public monies and that the investment is following the child.

Further information and resources for parents are available at www.ncs.gov.ie.

National Lottery Funding

887. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs further to Parliamentary Question No. 575 of 7 July 2020, the amount allocated to the discretionary national lottery funding scheme each year it was in operation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15899/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I can confirm that the Department of Children and Youth Affairs operated a discretionary National Lottery Funding Scheme from 2011 to 2014 in which grants were allocated to community groups and programmes to support children, young people and families. This scheme closed in 2014.

The records available to hand indicate that my Department’s Vote had a specific allocation of €500,000 in respect of this discretionary National Lottery funding in the years 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014.

As indicated previously, my Department currently has resource provisions for Youth Programmes and Services which are allocated under a distinct Subhead which is “part-funded by the National Lottery”. Under this arrangement the dedicated resource allocation contains a combination of Exchequer and National Lottery funding. As previously outlined, it is not possible for my Department to differentiate between the value of the Exchequer and National Lottery components of the funding resource.

Childcare Costs

888. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs if crèches are allowed to charge parents for holding a place for their child if the facility is drawing down Covid-19 funding supports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15917/20]

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): My Department strongly encourages service providers to support parents as best they can as they re-engage with early learning and care services.

Childcare services which are reopening over the summer, and are in receipt of a Reopening

Support Payment, are not permitted to increase their fees above the level which was charged in March 2020, before the Covid closures. Where a service has reopened, but parents have decided to delay returning their children to the service, the service may charge the parents a fee to hold a place for their child.

Services have been asked not to charge a holding fee or deposit unless it is essential for the financial sustainability of the service, and if a fee is charged, it should be as low as possible.

Maternity Leave

889. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if maternity leave for new mothers whose maternity leave is due to cease during Covid-19 will be extended; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14746/20]

890. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if maternity leave will be extended for mothers that had babies during the Covid-19 crisis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14756/20]

891. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality her plans to provide for future funding of an extension to paid maternity leave for women affected by the Covid-19 emergency crisis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14771/20]

892. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the position regarding the provision of extended maternity leave; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15125/20]

894. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality her plans to extend maternity benefit temporarily due to the effect of Covid-19 on the supply of crèche facilities for very young children and the social isolation faced by mothers who gave birth to a child during the Covid-19 pandemic; the cost that would be associated with an extension of the payment by three months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15182/20]

895. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality her views on a matter (details supplied) regarding the extension to maternity leave; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15239/20]

896. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the position regarding the request to have maternity benefit extended; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15853/20]

900. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if her attention has been drawn to the motion and petition on extending maternity leave and benefit. [14667/20]

902. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality her plans to extend maternity leave in view of Covid-19 restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14728/20]

904. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality her plans to extend maternity leave provisions for women affected by the Covid-19 crisis while on leave; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14773/20]

913. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality her plans to extend maternity leave due to the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on mothers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14924/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 889 to 892, inclusive, 894 to 896, inclusive, 900, 902, 904 and 913 together.

As the law now stands, a mother is entitled to paid maternity leave of up to 26 weeks, 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. Any amendment to the legislation governing the provision of maternity leave, which falls under my responsibility, would require primary legislation. The provision of maternity benefit is under the remit of the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

In recognition of the particular challenges that mothers and parents have faced during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Government is considering a proposal to advance the extension of Parent's Leave and Benefit to five weeks for all parents of children born after 1 November 2019, to enable every eligible parent of young children to spend additional time with their child.

At present, Parent's Leave entitles each parent to 2 weeks' leave during the first year of a child's life, or in the case of adoption, within one year of the placement of the child with the family.

The Government proposal would mean that eligible parents of children born during the pandemic crisis will get an extra three weeks of Parent's Leave to offset the impact of having a child during the strict lockdown measures. The period in which Parent's Leave can be taken will also be extended from one year to two years. This will be considered as part of the Budget 2021 process. The support is paid at a rate of €245 per week.

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.

The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) was introduced under the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020, to attempt to minimise the negative impact on the labour market through an exceptional period beginning on 26 March and scheduled to run for an initial period of 12 weeks.

On 3 June, the Government announced the TWSS would accommodate the salaries of parents returning from maternity or adoptive leave. This will be provided for by way of amendment in the Finance Bill 2020 process, and that in the meantime Revenue will implement the provision from 26 March, where applicable.

Ministerial Transport

893. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality when the former Tánaiste ceded his State car and Garda driver; the reason this was not done automatically when he ceased to be Tánaiste; the cost per annum of such services for the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality; and the figures for each of the years 2018, 2019 and 2020. [15157/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): I understand it is the decision of the Commissioner of An Garda Síochána that it is appropriate for the current arrangements to remain in place for the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Defence. As the Deputy will appreciate, it would not be appropriate to comment any further on security arrangements which are kept under ongoing review by An Garda Síochána.

I have requested the costs per annum of such services and the figures for the years in question from An Garda Síochána and will write to the Deputy upon receipt of them.

Questions Nos. 894 to 896, inclusive, answered with Question No. 889.

Legal Aid

897. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if moneys paid through the HAP scheme and homeless HAP scheme is considered as means or income for the purpose of calculating eligibility for civil legal advice and legal aid; the suggested recourse for a person who has been denied civil legal advice or a representative due to the fact he or she has accessed housing supports through HAP or the homeless HAP scheme and is left in a precarious situation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15859/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Legal Aid Board provides legal advice and aid under the Civil Legal Aid Act 1995 (“the Act”) and the Civil Legal Aid Regulations 1996-2017 (“the Regulations”). The Board delivers these services through directly employed solicitors in its network of law centres around the country and private solicitors from its private practitioner panels.

Section 3(3) of the Civil Legal Aid Act 1995 provides that the Legal Aid Board shall, subject to the provisions of the Act, be independent in the exercise of its functions. To be of assistance to the Deputy, however, I have had enquiries made with the Legal Aid Board and am advised as follows:

Applicants for legal aid must meet the financial eligibility criteria under section 29 of the Act and the Regulations. This provides that their disposable income (less certain allowances) must be below €18,000 and their disposable capital (less certain allowances and excluding the value of the home in which they live) must be below €100,000.

The Regulations make detailed provision for what is to be taken into account as income. In particular, Regulation 13(8) provides that:

““income”, in relation to an applicant, means the income which he or she may reasonably expect to receive from all sources...”

The effect of Regulation 13(8) is effectively that all income an applicant receives from whatever source must be taken into account unless it is specifically excluded. In addition Regulations 15(1)(e) states as follows:

“Subject to paragraph (8) of Regulation 13 and paragraph (6) of Regulation 16, ‘income’ shall include_

(e) the value of other benefits or privileges including the value of free or partly free board...”

Taking into account the above Regulations and in the absence of any provision specifically excluding Housing Assistance Payment as income, the Legal Aid Board is required to take Housing Assistance Payment (including Homeless HAP) into account as a form of income.

Any applicant who is aggrieved by any decision of the Board is entitled to seek an internal review of the decision within one month of the date of the decision and to submit further information in support of such a review. They are also entitled to appeal the matter to an appeal committee consisting of non-executive members of the Legal Aid Board.

The Board periodically brings proposals to my Department in relation to the financial eligibility and other criteria in relation to civil legal aid. The Legal Aid Board has provided a submission to my Department in regard to financial eligibility criteria for legal aid, including in regard to HAP payments, which is under consideration by my officials.

Direct Provision System

898. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if the limited time to seek employment will be extended in respect of residents in direct provision centres, taking into account the impact Covid-19 has had on finding employment due to restrictions put in place; if those who could not find employment within a certain timeframe will not be negatively impacted in relation to their asylum applications; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15911/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): In the assessment of all international protection applications each case is assessed on its own merits and each applicant is interviewed and given every opportunity to explain all the circumstances of their case and reasons why they fear returning to their country of origin. The granting or refusal of a Labour Market Access permission has no impact on the determination of an international protection application.

The European Communities (Reception Conditions) Regulations 2018, transposing the EU (Recast) Reception Conditions Directive, came into effect from 30 June 2018. The Regulations included access to the labour market for eligible international protection applicants. The Regulations provide access to both employment and to self-employment. Any applicant who has not received a first instance decision within 9 months can make an application for a labour market access permission.

If the application is successful, a labour market access permission, once granted, is valid for 6 months from the date of issue and can be renewed until a final decision is made on an applicant's international protection application. There is no time limit or obligation for a person to seek employment while holding such a permission.

The permission expires immediately if the applicant gets a final negative decision within the six month period. If the applicant is still awaiting a first instance decision after the expiry of the six month period, the permission may be renewable. Application for a renewal of the permission must be submitted to the Labour Market Access Unit of the Immigration Service of my Department one month in advance of the expiry date.

At the end of last year, my Department commenced work on a review of access to the labour market for international protections applicants. To date, the review has involved consultation with other divisions within the Department and with some key external stakeholders such as Ibec. It also involved a review of the submissions on labour market access made to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice and Equality in connection with its report on Direct Provision and the International Protection Process published in December 2019. The review is currently being finalised by my Department and I expect to receive it shortly for consideration.

Last year, Dr Catherine Day was asked to bring together an expert group with representation from asylum seekers and NGOs to examine best practice in other European States in the provision of services to international protection applicants, to examine likely longer term trends and to set out recommendations and solutions. The work of the group is advancing at pace and their report is expected by the end of September. A briefing paper on the work of the group, prepared by the Chairperson to inform programme for government talks, was recently circulated to members of both Houses of the Oireachtas by the previous Minister. This includes a list of measures, identified so far, which would immediately improve the situation of those currently in direct provision including extending the right to work. This will also inform the review mentioned above.

Direct Provision System

899. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the estimated cost of dismantling direct provision; and if there is to be increased funding to her Department to this end. [16035/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): As confirmed in the Programme for Government, the Government is committed to ensuring that Ireland provides protection to those seeking refuge from conflict and persecution, as is required under international law. The Government is also committed to ending the Direct Provision system within the lifetime of the Government and to replacing it with a new international protection accommodation policy, centred on a not-for-profit approach. Last year, Dr Catherine Day was asked to bring together an expert group with representation from asylum seekers and NGOs to examine best practice in other European States in the provision of services to international protection applicants, to examine likely longer term trends and to set out recommendations and solutions. Any new system for the provision of accommodation and additional supports to international protection applicants will be informed by the Report of this Expert Group.

Responsibility for the accommodation system is transferring from my Department to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, and officials from both Departments are making the necessary arrangements to facilitate the transfer of functions.

Where responsibility for a matter is transferred between Departments, in line with the Transfer of Functions Guidelines, the resources to implement that responsibility (including staff, pay, non-pay or programme spend) also transfer. The Guidelines state that further revised estimates, amended estimates or a supplementary estimate, as appropriate, will be prepared to take account of changes in function.

Once a plan to implement the commitment to end the use of the direct provision system of accommodation and other State supports in the Programme for Government is determined by Government, it will be possible for the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to cost the proposed alternative.

Question No. 900 answered with Question No. 889.

Naturalisation Applications

901. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the residency status in the case of a person (details supplied); if the return of original documents submitted as part of the person's application will be expedited in view of the fact the individual is urgently required; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14718/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The person concerned made an application for a certificate of naturalisation on 10 May 2018 and submitted their national passport. Correspondence issued to the applicant's solicitor on 26 February 2019, advising that the passport was subject to examination and verification procedures.

The checks involved identified a possible issue with the passport submitted by the applicant and it is therefore subject to further investigation. The solicitor, for the applicant, was advised that my Department will revert to them on completion of the relevant investigation.

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.

Question No. 902 answered with Question No. 889.

Immigration Status

903. **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 she will make a statement on the matter. [14733/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): 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 person 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.

This case is amongst many to be considered at present and, as such, it is not possible at this point in time to provide a specific indication as to when the case will be finalised. However, the person concerned can be assured that there will be no avoidable delay in having their case brought to finality.

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. 904 answered with Question No. 889.

Extradition Arrangements

905. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the position on extraditing persons to states such as Lithuania, which are documented by international human rights organisations as having severe human rights violations of their prison populations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14774/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The High Court is the competent authority in this State for matters and decisions in relation to extradition and surrender under the European Arrest Warrant. It is entirely independent in the discharge of these functions.

Any person who is before the Court in relation to such matters is entitled to legal representation and may bring any issue they consider to be of relevance to their case to the Court's attention.

It would be entirely inappropriate for me as Minister to make any further comment on this matter.

Inquiry into the Death of Mr. Shane O'Farrell

906. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if she will commission an independent inquiry as supported by the Thirty-second Dáil into the circumstances surrounding the death of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14775/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, a retired judge, Gerard Haughton, is conducting a scoping exercise into the tragic death of the person in question, whose case has been discussed in Dáil Éireann on a number of occasions. The judge furnished an interim report to my predecessor on 13 November last. Following consultation with the family concerned, Judge Haughton and the Attorney General, the interim report was published on 17 December 2019.

In his interim report, Judge Haughton states that he will not restrict or limit the family in their submissions to him or the nature and extent of the documentation they wish to furnish to him in his scoping exercise.

I am glad to note that the family are working with Judge Haughton. My Department is in regular contact with the judge and has assured him of any assistance he requires to complete his final report.

I understand that Judge Haughton has recently informed my Department and the family of the reasons why he does not believe that he can finalise matters within the timescale referred to in his Interim Report and has indicated that it is likely to be late September before he will be in a position to conclude the scoping exercise.

It is of course open to the judge to make any recommendation he sees fit in his final report, including the establishment of any form of statutory or non-statutory inquiry. I will await the recommendation of Judge Haughton in his final report before making any decision in relation to further inquiries into this matter.

Direct Provision System

907. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the steps she will take to abolish the direct provision system; and her plans to replace same. [14776/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): As confirmed in the Programme for Government, the Government is committed to ensuring that Ireland provides protection to those seeking refuge from conflict and persecution, as is required under international law. It is also committed to ending the current system of directly providing accommodation and other State supports to applicants for international protection within the lifetime of the Government and to replacing it with a new international protection accommodation policy, centred on a not-for-profit approach. Responsibility for the accommodation system is transferring from my Department to the Department of Children, Disability, Equality and Integration and officials from both Departments are making the necessary arrangements to facilitate the transfer of functions.

Last year, Dr Catherine Day was asked to bring together an expert group with representation from asylum seekers and NGOs to examine best practice in other European States in the provision of services to international protection applicants, to examine likely longer term trends and to set out recommendations and solutions. Any new system for the provision of accommodation

and additional supports to international protection applicants will be informed by the Report of this Expert Group.

The Group is examining both the reception system for accommodating applicants and the system for processing applications, and is expected to make recommendations for changes in both areas. A briefing paper on the work of the group, prepared by the Chairperson to inform programme for government talks, was recently circulated to members of both Houses of the Oireachtas by the previous Minister. The work of the group is advancing at pace and their report is expected by the end of September.

The intention as stated in the Programme for Government is to publish a White Paper by the end of this year, informed by the recommendations of the Expert Group, which will set out how a replacement to the Direct Provision system will be structured and the steps to achieving it. It will be a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, to progress the matter following the transfer of this function to his Department.

Ministerial Responsibilities

908. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if she will provide a copy of the departmental briefings received by her and each Minister of State in her Department upon taking up each individual role; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14807/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department intends to publish the briefing material provided to the Minister and Minister of State, subject to appropriate redaction guided by the Freedom of Information Act, and will provide the Deputy with a copy of this as soon as it is available.

Deportation Orders

909. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the position regarding the request to set aside a deportation order in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14825/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): Representations have been received on behalf of the person mentioned by the Deputy requesting that the deportation order be revoked, pursuant to the provisions of Section 3(11) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended).

These representations will be considered as soon as possible. A decision will then be made to either “affirm” or “revoke” the existing deportation order. This decision will be communicated in writing. In the meantime, the deportation order remains valid and in place.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to the Immigration Service of 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 from the Immigration Service is, in the Deputy’s view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Prisoner Complaints Procedures

910. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of category B, C, D and E complaints made by prisoners in 2019 and to date in 2020; the details of the outcomes upheld, not upheld, not proven, terminated, incomplete or withdrawn; the length of time it took to complete and communicate the outcomes of complaints to prisoners; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14826/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): A prisoner complaints system was introduced by the Irish Prison Service in November 2012, based on a model recommended by the then-Inspector of Prisons, the late Judge Michael Reilly. The current Irish Prison Service Complaints Policy is available on the website www.irishprisons.ie.

As set out in more detail in that policy, all prisoners have the right to make a complaint at any time and all complaints are treated with the utmost seriousness. The current system categorises complaints according to their nature and seriousness, ranging from the most serious ‘Category A’ through to a ‘Category F’ complaint.

- The most serious “Category A” complaints are those alleging assault or use of excessive force against a prisoner, or ill treatment, racial abuse, discrimination, intimidation, threats or any other conduct against a prisoner of a nature and gravity likely to bring discredit on the Irish Prison Service. I understand that Category A complaints are independently investigated by persons outside the Prison Service.

- Category B complaints are serious level complaints, which may include verbal abuse, inappropriate searches or any conduct against a prisoner of a nature likely to bring discredit on the Irish Prison Service.

- Category C may include complaints about visits, phone calls, reception issues.

- Category D complaints can be made against professionals which include medical personnel and solicitors.

- Category E can be made by visitors to the prison.

Further information on this system, including these categories, is available on the website of the Irish Prison Service at the following link: <https://www.irishprisons.ie/prisoner-services/prisoner-complaints/>

In response to this question and further to the Deputy’s previous parliamentary Question No. 318 for reply on 30 June 2020, the following table, furnished to me by the Irish Prison Service, sets out the number of category B, C, D and E complaints received in 2019 and to date in 2020.

Complaints received	Category B	Category C	Category D	Category E	Total
2019	149	678	137	12	976
2020 (as of May 2020)	55	243	40	2	340

The following table, furnished to me by the Irish Prison Service, sets out the further details requested by the Deputy, namely the details of the outcome of complaints. I am informed that ‘other’ refers to vexatious complaints.

	2019	2020
Upheld/Partially upheld	137	51
Not upheld	550	167
Withdrawn	19	10

	2019	2020
Incomplete	35	31
Resolved	197	74
Not investigated	25	2
Other	13	5

I am informed by the Irish Prison Service that prisons have reported that the average length of time to complete and communicate outcomes in these categories of complaints is between two and six weeks.

Finally and set out in more detail in my reply to parliamentary Question No. 314 of 30 June 2020, I have been advised that the introduction and implementation of a new Prison Service Complaints Policy is a priority for the Irish Prison Service. I understand that work is well advanced in this regard and that the Irish Prison expects to introduce the new prisoner complaints system before the end of 2020.

Covid-19 Pandemic

911. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if the number of public health passenger locator forms issued and processed by her officials during their tenure of the collection of same on a temporary administrative basis on behalf of the health authorities will be provided; the number of follow-up checks conducted on persons that submitted forms; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14856/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): On the 28 April 2020 my Department agreed to undertake, on behalf of the health authorities, the collection of public health passenger locator forms on a temporary administrative basis. The Border Management Unit (BMU) operate the scheme at Dublin Airport, which is the principal route through which people enter the State by air. While the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) manage the compliance for the other ports, the passenger locator forms are forwarded to the BMU in Dublin Airport, who also carry out the follow-up calls for those ports.

Any cases of non-compliance, identified by the BMU are referred directly to the GNIB for follow up. Section 31(a) of the Health Act 1947 (as amended) provides for powers of arrest for An Garda Síochána. The Act and the regulations were brought forward by the Minister for Health.

The BMU established a system to follow-up on all arrivals at a proportionate rate of a minimum of 70%, after removal of the exempt categories of passengers. The cohort of passengers failing to answer initial phone calls are followed up with repeated further telephone contacts. The first calls are made two days after passengers have arrived into the State. For any passengers staying in the State for up to 14 days or more, a second call will be made on day 10 to ensure they are still residing at the address provided and self-isolating.

The BMU operates 24/7 on a split roster over two terminals in Dublin Airport, comprising of eight teams working a 12 hour shift. The current staffing numbers are as follows:

- 1 Assistant Principal Officer
- 2 Higher Executive Officers
- 18 Executive Officers
- 128 Clerical Officers.

Since the introduction of the Passenger Locator Form, every member of the Unit has been involved in the collection of passenger information and follow up phone calls to passengers.

There has been almost 100% compliance at Dublin Airport with the requirement to complete the form from incoming passengers. To date, only 3 people have been referred to GNIB due to their refusal to complete.

Up until late June 2020, 100% of inward travellers were phoned by the Border Management Unit. Due to a natural increase in passenger numbers, and the return by BMU staff to core functions, this percentage has reduced since 1st July 2020.

The table below details the compliance rate for the period 28 April – 30 June 2020.

Dublin Airport	
Passenger Arrivals	28.4.20 - 30.6.20
Forms Received	41,949
Exempt from Follow-Up This includes passengers- Transiting to NI- In the State for less than 2 days- Completing forms unnecessarily	11,695
Number of Call 1 Made (2 days after Arrival)	28,544
Calls Answered	18,246
% Answered	64%
Passenger Arrivals	28.04.20 - 19.06.20
Number of Call 2 Made (12 days after Arrival)	16,295
Calls Answered	8,649
% Answered	51%
Dublin Port	
Passenger Arrivals	28.4.20 - 30.6.20
Forms Received	19,338
Exempt from Follow-Up This includes passengers- Transiting to NI- In the State for less than 2 days- Completing forms unnecessarily	12,082
Number of Calls Made	6,645
Calls Answered	3,283
% Answered	49%
Rosslare Port	
Passenger Arrivals	28.4.20 - 23.6.20
Forms Received	4,584
Exempt from Follow-Up This includes passengers- Transiting to NI- In the State for less than 2 days- Completing forms unnecessarily	2,637
Number of Calls Made	1,889
Calls Answered	999
% Answered	53%
Cork Airport	
Passenger Arrivals	28.4.20 - 25.6.20
Forms Received	1,676
Exempt from Follow-Up This includes passengers- Transiting to NI- In the State for less than 2 days- Completing forms unnecessarily	315
Number of Calls Made	1,359
Calls Answered	720

Cork Airport	
Passenger Arrivals	28.4.20 - 25.6.20
% Answered	53%

The BMU continues to carry out the follow up phone calls on behalf of the HSE, but as passenger numbers are expected to increase significantly over the coming days, the BMU will need to focus exclusively on their core function of immigrating passengers and the HSE will take responsibility for this function. Discussions are ongoing between both Departments to finalise a date for the handover.

Prisoner Complaints Procedures

912. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if her Department was notified of a hunger strike or protest in Cork prison in July 2013 by the Prison Service; if an official complaint was made known to the governor at the time; the action taken by the governor as a result of these complaints; if there was an investigation into these claims; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14857/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): Following the provision of further information by the Deputy, I am informed by the Irish Prison Service that it is conducting a search of records dating to 2013, to establish whether there was an incident of the type referred to and any other information in that regard.

I will write directly to the Deputy as soon as possible, once the results of that search of records are available.

Question No. 913 answered with Question No. 889.

Refugee Status

914. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if an error made by her Department in the issuing of a refugee declaration can be rectified urgently in order that the nationality of a person (details supplied) can be correctly listed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14960/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): Due to the restrictions in place because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the processing of identity change requests will be limited until further notice.

However, an official from my Department will contact the person concerned in the coming days to update her on her case.

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.

Deportation Orders

915. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the residency status in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [14987/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The persons concerned are the subject of Deportation Orders, signed on 20 February 2019, requiring them to remove themselves from the State and to remain outside the State. The enforcement of Deportation Orders is a matter for the Garda National Immigration Bureau.

Representations have since been received on behalf of the persons concerned, requesting that the Deportation Orders be revoked pursuant to the provisions of Section 3(11) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended). This request will be considered as soon as possible and the decision to either “affirm” or “revoke” the existing Deportation Orders will be communicated to the persons concerned in writing. In the meantime, the Deportation Orders remains valid and in place.

It is not possible to provide a definitive time-frame within which a particular application will be decided. The persons referred to can be assured that there will be no avoidable delay in having their case brought to finality.

Queries in relation to the status of individual 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.

Garda Strength

916. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the strength of An Garda Síochána, including the Garda Reserve; the degree to which the numbers have fluctuated in the past four years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15002/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): 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.

As at 31 May 2020, there are now 14,700 Gardaí - the largest ever number - and 436 Garda Reserves nationwide, supported by over 3,000 Garda staff and these numbers are continuing to grow.

A detailed breakdown of the Garda workforce, including Garda members, Garda Reserves and Garda staff, is available on my Department’s website. This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána, in the interests of transparency and for the convenience of Deputies and the wider public.

Information on the Garda workforce including Garda staff is available at the following link:

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Workforce

Information on the strength of the Garda Reserve in each of the years from 2009 to 31 May 2020 can be found at the following link:

http://justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Reserve.

State Pardons

917. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of an application for a presidential pardon (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15014/20]

919. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the position in respect of efforts to pardon a person (details supplied); if she will prioritise the continuation of the process initiated by her predecessor in order that they will be pardoned and closure given to their relatives; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15036/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 917 and 919 together.

I want to thank the Deputy for raising this matter with me, which I know he has previously raised with my predecessor as Minister.

The case in question has received detailed consideration by officials in my Department and a relevant academic has been engaged to provide expert opinion on the matter.

I will write to the Deputy directly with a further update.

International Protection

918. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality further to previous parliamentary questions in the case of a person (details supplied), if the information requested can be supplied; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15016/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): For reasons of maintaining full confidentiality, it is not my Department's practice to comment on whether an application for asylum or subsidiary protection has been made in the State, Section 26 of the International Protection Act 2015 refers.

An applicant for such protection status, or their legal representative, should contact either the International Protection Office (IPO) or the International Protection Appeals Tribunal (IPAT) directly, as appropriate.

However, I can confirm that an applicant for international protection is awarded international protection, whether refugee status or subsidiary protection status, upon a declaration of status being issued from my Department. This is done on foot of a grant recommendation from the International Protection Office (IPO) or a decision of the International Protection Appeals Tribunal (IPAT) to set aside a refusal recommendation of the IPO.

My Department processes the recommendations received from the International Protection Office and the decisions of the International Protection Appeals Tribunal in chronological order based on the date the file is received in that Unit. Once the necessary due diligence has been

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carried out by the Ministerial Decisions Unit, a declaration of status will issue as soon as possible thereafter.

The International Protection Office may be contacted: by email to info@ipo.gov.ie; by telephone to the IPO Customer Service Centre at 01 6028008 or in writing to Customer Service Centre, International Protection Office, 79-83 Lower Mount Street, Dublin 2.

The International Protection Appeals Tribunal may be contacted either: by email to info@protectionappeals.ie; by telephone at 01-4748400 (or Lo-Call 1890 201 458), or in writing to Corporate Services Division, The International Protection Appeals Tribunal, 6-7 Hanover Street East, Dublin D02 W320.

The Ministerial Decisions Unit operates an email service for responding to queries - mdu-info@justice.ie.

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. 919 answered with Question No. 917.

Ministerial Responsibilities

920. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for law reform; and the date those delegated functions come into effect. [15048/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The delegation of functions to the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, is currently under consideration and further details will be announced when finalised.

Immigration Status

921. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the position regarding eligibility of residency status, stamp 4 and eligibility for naturalisation in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15079/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The person referred to by the Deputy is the subject of a deportation order signed on 25 August 2017 and, therefore, does not meet the requirements to qualify for a certificate of naturalisation.

Representations were received on behalf of the person concerned requesting that the deportation order made in respect of them be revoked, pursuant to the provisions of Section 3(11) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) in the period 29 September 2017 and 07 March 2018. Following full consideration of these representations, the deportation order was affirmed and notified to the person concerned in writing on 08 May 2019 to their last known address. The deportation order remains valid and in place and the enforcement of a Deportation Order is a matter for the Garda National Immigration Bureau.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to the Immigration Service of 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 from the Immigration Service is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Garda Data

922. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the breakdown of Garda vehicle resources in the DMR; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15111/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): 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. Further, the allocation of Garda resources is a matter for the Commissioner, in light of identified operational demands. This includes responsibility for the allocation of Garda vehicles among the various Garda divisions. As Minister, I have no role in these matters. I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that as of 30 June 2020, there were 2,961 vehicles attached to the Garda fleet. I understand that this compares to a total of 2,794 vehicles as of end December 2019.

The following table, furnished to me by the Garda authorities, set out the number of vehicles attached to the DMR as at 30 June 2020.

Division	Cars	Vans	Motorcycles	4 x 4	*Others	Total
DMR EAST	56	11	0	1	1	69
DMR NORTH	87	13	0	1	1	102
DMR NORTH CENTRAL	54	12	0	3	1	70
DMR SOUTH CENTRAL	56	14	0	0	1	71
DMR SOUTH	64	16	0	2	1	83
DMR TRAFFIC	21	2	49	3	0	75
DMR WEST	76	14	0	0	7	97
TOTAL	414	82	49	10	12	567

*The category 'Others' refers to MPV, SUV, Minibus or Prisoner Conveyance Vehicles

For clarity, it may be noted that these figures do not include the additional 210 vehicles which have been hired by An Garda Síochána this year, to provide additional capacity during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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. 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.

Of this investment, a total of €9 million was made available for purchase and fit-out of addi-

tional Garda vehicles in 2020. I am also informed that in order to protect the ongoing availability of vehicles and in anticipation of the impact 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 €2.4 million and fit-out costs of €600,000. The allocation of these and all other vehicles in the fleet is entirely a matter for the Commissioner and his management team.

Garda Operations

923. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of establishments investigated for breaches of guidelines on return to work since 29 June 2020 by Garda division and business activity in tabular form. [15131/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy is aware, the Garda powers in response to the Covid -19 pandemic were provided for under section 31A of the Health Act 1947, as inserted by the Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020 and brought temporarily into effect through subsequent regulations – the Health Act, 1947 (Section 31A – Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) Regulations 2020. There was consultation between senior officials in my Department and the Department of Health in relation to this legislation, and, having been drafted by the Attorney General’s Office, the regulations were signed by the then Minister for Health, following consultation with my predecessor, Deputy Flanagan, as Minister for Justice and Equality, as well as the then Minister for Finance and for Public Expenditure and Reform.

On foot of this 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. 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.

Adherence to the return to work guidelines by establishments referred to by the Deputy is not a matter for An Garda Síochána but, rather, for the Health and Safety Authority.

Substance Misuse

924. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if she has received briefings as to the use of nitrous oxide canisters; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15133/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): I am informed that An Garda Síochána is aware of the potential health issues that arise as a consequence of the misuse of nitrous oxide. However, at present, nitrous oxide is not a controlled substance under the Misuse of Drugs Acts and is therefore outside my remit as Minister for Justice and Equality.

Requests for information in relation to the misuse of nitrous oxide should therefore be directed to the Department of Health, the HSE and the Health Products Regulatory Authority, which I understand has previously issued advisories on the misuse of this substance.

I can, however, confirm to the Deputy that the Garda National Drugs & Organised Crime Bureau (GNDOCB) interacts with the Health Service Executive (HSE) and other relevant stakeholders, including the Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA), where it observes

particular trends in drug use that may require intervention on the part of the Department of Health or other relevant Department and/or State agency. This is in line with the National Drug and Alcohol Strategy which includes actions to strengthen the response to the illegal drugs market by developing systems to monitor changing drug trends in line with the EU Early Warning System (3.3.38a) and to complete the development of the HSE public alert system for adverse events due to drugs (3.3.38b).

In this regard, I am informed by the Garda authorities that the GNDOCB has communicated with the relevant bodies relating to its experience relating to the possession and use by particular persons of nitrous oxide.

Carer's Leave

925. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if she will consider introducing a statutory instrument to extend carer's leave and allowance until the end of 2020 for certain cohorts of persons (details supplied). [15144/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): Section 6 of the Carer's Leave Act 2001 provides that employees with at least one year's continuous service are entitled to take up to 104 weeks of carer's leave.

While there are no plans to amend the Carer's Leave Act, I am conscious of demands on parents at this time and hope that the additional measures to support working parents that my Department has introduced in recent years are helping to ease some of these demands. For example, from 1 September 2016, under the Paternity Leave and Benefit Act, fathers are entitled to two weeks of paternity leave and benefit. From 1 October 2017, the duration of maternity leave and benefit has been extended in cases where a baby is born prematurely. From 1 November 2019, under the Parent's Leave and Benefit Act, new parents are entitled to two weeks each of parent's leave and benefit, to be taken within the first year of a child's life. On 1 September 2019, under the Parental Leave (Amendment) Act, unpaid parental leave was increased from 18 weeks to 26 weeks.

Direct Provision System

926. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if plans are under way for the closure of a direct provision centre (details supplied) on the basis that the town is completely unsuitable as the location for such a facility in view of the lack of appropriate services locally and the fact that Ireland is entering a new phase in the response to Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15173/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): My Department, the HSE and the management of all of our centres are doing everything that we can to protect the health and welfare of our residents and centre staff as well as that of the wider community at this time. We are working closely with the HSE in doing so, and while the HSE advice has evolved over time, we have been assured by both it and the Office of the Chief Medical Officer that our approach is appropriate.

All accommodation centres are carefully following the guidelines for our centres that have been published by the HSE's Health Protection Surveillance Centre, which can be found on its website www.hpsc.ie. That guidance exists precisely because it is recognised that congregated settings such as Direct Provision centres present specific challenges in this pandemic.

The HSE confirmed on 20 May 2020 that an outbreak in the centre referred to 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 the Government's roadmap.

With respect to access to services, my Department works closely with other Departments and agencies to link residents in with the necessary supports and services when an accommodation centre is being opened including with the Department of Education and Skills, DES, to plan for school provision for children resident in the centre. Asylum-seeking children living in accommodation centres are educated within the mainstream education system and can access free primary and post-primary education in the same way as other children in Ireland. A DES official is seconded to my Department to act as a liaison between both Departments and with schools, and the Tusla Education Support Service.

The Tusla Education Support Service is responsible for assisting with school enrolment and attendance. Following the opening of a new accommodation centre, contact is made with local schools and a meeting is held with the centre manager, Tusla Education Support Service and the Department of Education and Skills to discuss and agree issues relating to the enrolment of the pupils. If there is a high concentration of children of school going age in the one centre, children are linked to a number of schools in the surrounding area.

When the numbers and age ranges of the children from the centre are identified, the Department of Education and Skills will ensure that:

- Where the increase in the numbers of students entitles the school to an additional teaching allocation, this will be provided as soon as possible.

- Where the enrolment of the children resident in the accommodation centre entitles the school to an additional teaching allocation for English as an Additional Language (EAL), this will be provided as soon as possible.

- Where the increased enrolment requires an increase in the school's special educational needs teacher profile, they will receive, as soon as possible, 5 additional Special Education Teaching hours for every 25 additional pupils who are enrolled, or a proportion of five hours if less than 25.

- Additional SNA provision for identified additional care needs.

A DES representative is available to advise schools on specific queries arising, including on the range of supports available to schools and on how to access supports. In order to ensure additional provision is made to schools without delay, schools who are enrolling children from accommodation centres will be invited by the Department of Education and Skills to apply for these supports in advance of those children beginning school.

Following the enrolment of pupils in local schools, if school transport is required, contact is made with Bus Éireann, who operate the School Transport Scheme on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills.

All residents with children of school going-age are also advised of the availability of the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance.

Adult residents are linked in with English language classes run by the local Education and Training Board.

Similarly with respect to health services, residents in the centre access local health services in the same manner as the local community. Access to GP services are provided through the

medical card system. The Department of Health and the HSE work closely with my Department to facilitate the delivery of health care services in the area. My Department covers travel costs for any centre resident who has to travel to access health services, inclusive of GP out of hours services.

In addition, international protection applicants access services and supports from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. These include:

- a Personal Public Services Number (PPSN) for access to public services and financial supports;

- a Daily Expenses Allowance (€38.80 per week for an adult and €29.80 per week for a child);

- an Exceptional Needs Payment if required to help meet essential, once-off, exceptional expenditure, which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet out of their weekly income. This might include a payment for clothing, baby items or transport costs to necessary appointments. The amount of payment depends on a means test and the type of assistance required; and

- access to the Public Employment Service through the Intreo Centre network where Case Officers will assist, guide and support these clients in their job seeking efforts and/or educational needs. Applicants may have permission to access the labour market if they have not received a decision on their application within 9 months and if they have cooperated with the system.

A number of measures were introduced in the accommodation centre recently to make life more comfortable for the residents and in particular the children who are living there.

Families with children were provided with arts and crafts materials, toys, books and tablets, to use as they wished. This was coordinated by the local Family Resource Centre with the cost of the tablets specifically covered by Tusla. Additionally, I am informed that the service provider at the centre has provided 12 laptops for residents' use, including the children of school going age.

I can also inform the Deputy that all international protection accommodation centres are contractually obliged to have Wi-Fi available to residents and TVs are provided in all bedrooms to enable children to access web-based educational resources and educational programmes.

Additional outdoor space has been opened up in the centre 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 is being operated under their direction for safe use. The Department understands that the service provider also intends to install a playground in the coming weeks as an additional recreation facility for the children.

Virtual clinics between residents and my Department officials have been held in recent weeks to address any concerns the residents may have. A confidential Freephone telephone support service run by the Jesuit Refugee Service has also been introduced as a further support to residents in all centres.

While the centre is currently catered, in line with our overall policy objectives for all accommodation centres, the service provider plans to introduce independent living arrangements with cooking facilities for residents in the coming period.

My Department will continue to ensure that centre management manage the comfort and

safety of all residents in the centre, and has no intention to close the centre at this time.

Garda Operations

927. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding the seizure of cars by An Garda Síochána; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15188/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Road Traffic (Amendment) Act 2018, known as the Clancy Amendment, seeks to penalise car owners who knowingly allow their vehicles to be used by an unaccompanied learner driver. The law allows the owners of these vehicles to be fined and gives Gardaí the power to seize their cars if being driven by unaccompanied drivers.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the monthly breakdown of incidents where a vehicle was seized under the Road Traffic (Amendment) Act 2018 is as follows:

2019												2020					
Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
222	251	219	223	253	219	181	215	189	210	159	169	238	235	203	248	263	254

I am further informed that the breakdown of incidents by year and the age groups within that particular year is as follows:

2019 Age Group	2019 Total	2020 Age Group	2020 Total
U20	322	U20	242
20-24	630	20-24	364
25-29	513	25-29	267
30-34	330	30-34	178
35-39	268	35-39	153
40+	434	40+	229
Unknown	13	Unknown	8

The 2020 data is from January to June 2020 and the 2019 data is full year data. All information contained in the tables is based upon operational data from the PULSE system as was available on 10 July 2020 and is liable to change.

Coroners Service

928. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason for the two coronial districts of Tipperary north and Tipperary south; the number of cases dealt with by each coronial district nationally in the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15253/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): At present, there are 39 coronial districts in Ireland, served by 34 Coroners. Some of these coronial districts lie within the same county's administrative area, such as Galway (3 coronial districts), Monaghan (2 coronial districts), Cork County (3 coronial districts), Kerry (3 coronial districts), Wicklow (2 coronial districts), Mayo (2 coronial districts -reduced from 3 coronial districts in 2016) Waterford (3 coronial districts) and Tipperary (2 coronial districts).

Section 7 of the Coroner's Act as amended by the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2011 provides for the amalgamation of coronial districts by the Minister for Justice and

Equality in consultation with the local authority concerned. This has happened previously in relation to a number of coronial districts, particularly upon the retirement of a coroner. The four coronial districts in Donegal were amalgamated to form one coronial district in the county, as were the coronial districts of Limerick City, Limerick West and Limerick South East.

As outlined in my response to Dáil Question 281, on 30 June 2020, due to the forthcoming retirement of the Coroner for Tipperary South on 25 June 2021, it has been agreed to amalgamate, by way of Section 7 of the Coroners Acts 1962 – 2019, the two Coronial Districts of Tipperary North and Tipperary South with effect from 25 June 2021. On that date, Mr Joseph P Kelly will become Coroner for the newly amalgamated Coronial District of Tipperary.

The number of cases dealt with by each coronial district nationally in the past five years can be found on the “Publications” tab on *www.coroners.ie*.

Garda Data

929. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of marked and unmarked Garda cars and motorcycles attached to each roads policing unit as of 1 July 2019 and 1 July 2020, in tabular form. [15273/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): 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. Under the Act, the allocation of Garda resources is a matter for the Commissioner, in light of identified operational demands. This includes responsibility for the allocation of Garda vehicles among the various Garda divisions. As Minister, I have no role in these matters. I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that as at 1 July 2020 there were 296 vehicles assigned to Roads Policing Duties nationwide. This figure is consistent with vehicles assigned to Roads Policing duty at 1 July 2019.

For the Deputy’s information the attached spreadsheet sets out the vehicles assigned to Roads Policing duties for the dates requested by the Deputy. I am advised that within the DMR, there is a Roads Policing Division based in Dublin Castle (referred to as Traffic in the attached document) and there are also units within each of the six geographical Divisions within the DMR which cover road policing duties.

For clarity, it may be noted that these figures do not include the additional 210 vehicles which have been hired by An Garda Síochána this year, to provide additional capacity during the Covid-19 pandemic.

I understand that the Commissioner established the Garda National Roads Policing Bureau to ensure a consistent approach to road safety and enforcement of road traffic legislation across the country. This is achieved through coordination of enforcement and development of policy based on research and analysis of statistics and by engaging in campaigns in partnership with other State agencies.

In addition to a focus on the lifesaver offences of speeding, seatbelts, mobile phones and driving under the influence, Divisional Roads Policing Units work closely with other relevant Divisional Units to target known criminals and to disrupt their activities through strict enforcement of road traffic legislation.

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Separately, the Deputy will be aware 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. 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.

Of this investment, a total of €9 million was made available for purchase and fit-out of additional Garda vehicles in 2020. I am also informed that in order to protect the ongoing availability of vehicles and in anticipation of the impact 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 and fit-out costs of €600,000. The allocation of these and all other vehicles in the fleet is entirely a matter for the Commissioner and his management team.

[Garda Vehicles]

Garda Stations

930. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of cells in each Garda station in Dublin as of 3 July 2020. [15275/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): I have requested information from the Garda Commissioner in relation to this matter but it was unfortunately not possible to compile it in the time available.

I will write to the Deputy directly with the information requested, when it is available.

Garda Data

931. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the amount of cash seized by An Garda Síochána under proceeds of crime legislation returned to the Exchequer in each of the years 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [15276/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Deputy will be aware that all funds collected by the Criminal Assets Bureau (CAB) in the course of its activities are returned to the Exchequer for the benefit of the Central Fund, in accordance with the relevant legislation.

I have been informed by the Garda Authorities that the following table sets out monies returned to the Exchequer by the Bureau, under section 4(1) / 4(A) of the Proceeds of Crime Act 1996 – 2016, for the years 2018, 2019 and 2020 (to date).

Moneys returned to the Exchequer by CAB

Year	Amount
2018	€2,271,800
2019	€1,559,727
2020 (30/06/2020)	€95,487

For the Deputy's information, these figures represent a proportion of the funds returned to the State by CAB. The Bureau also returns funds to the State under Revenue legislation and through recovery of social welfare overpayments. In 2018, CAB returned in excess of €5.6 mil-

lion to the State including €3.097 million under Revenue legislation and €0.323 in social welfare overpayments in addition to the above figures. For 2019, CAB returned in excess of €3.9 million to the State including €2.026 million under Revenue legislation and €0.324 in social welfare overpayments in addition to the above figures.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Criminal Assets Bureau (CAB) is a multi-agency statutory body established under the Criminal Assets Bureau Act 1996. The Bureau's remit is to target a person's assets, wherever situated, which derive, or are suspected to derive, directly or indirectly, from criminal conduct. Since its inception, the Bureau has been at the forefront of fighting organised crime in this jurisdiction and disrupting the activities of criminal gangs by depriving them of ill-gotten assets.

The Bureau is widely regarded as a best practice model in the context of combating organised crime. It works closely with law enforcement bodies at national and international levels and continues to relentlessly pursue the illicit proceeds of organised crime activity. The actions of the Bureau send a strong message to criminals and to local communities that profiting from crime will not be tolerated.

The Proceeds of Crime Acts 1996 - 2016 provide the legal framework underpinning the Bureau's powers to take all necessary actions, including the making of applications to the High Court, in relation to the seizing and securing of assets with a view to their disposal in due course in accordance with the provisions of that legislation.

Garda Expenditure

932. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the amount of funding provided for the building programme of An Garda Síochána under the 2016-2021 capital plan; and the amount spend in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to date in 2020. [15278/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): 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, 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 purpose of the ongoing Garda Building and Refurbishment Programme 2016-2021 is to address deficiencies in the Garda estate and provide fit-for-purpose facilities for Garda members and staff as well as the public interacting with them. The programme is based on agreed Garda priorities and includes substantial works at over 30 locations nationwide as well as other works such as cell refurbishment at over 100 locations.

The scale of what is involved in this task should not be underestimated – as there are over 560 Garda stations nationwide, including a significant number of old buildings.

Good progress is being made in addressing issues in the Garda estate and indeed expanding it to cater for the ongoing growth in Garda members and staff.

Capital investment for the Garda Estate for 2020 is €32m. I have contacted An Garda Síochána in relation to the amounts expended on the estate for the years sought and will write directly to the Deputy when a response is available.

Alcohol Sales

933. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality her views on the campaign by an organisation (details supplied) to deliver change on drink deliveries; her further views on whether there is an urgent need to regulate drink delivery services, ensure effective age verification methods and legislate for both hours of sale and delivery; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15302/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): I understand the concerns that people have in relation to the purchase for delivery of alcohol products and am very conscious of the detrimental effects of alcohol dependency on families and society.

In terms of assessing whether a review of legislation is required in relation to the delivery of alcohol, however, it is essential that there is a clear understanding of what the current regulations are under existing legislation.

There is no dedicated licence for on-line sales of intoxicating liquor but licensees of licensed premises may engage in on-line sales subject to certain restrictive conditions.

As matters stand, under existing legislation where alcohol is purchased online, the same restrictions on the sale and supply of intoxicating liquor apply, including the restrictions in relation to hours of trading and the provisions in relation to the sale and supply of intoxicating liquor to young persons.

Under section 17(3) of the Intoxicating Liquor Act 2003, it is an offence for a licensee, with intent to evade the conditions of the licence, to take intoxicating liquor from the licensed premises for the purpose of its being sold on the account or for the benefit or profit of the licensee, or to permit any other person to do so. The penalty on conviction is a fine of up to €1,500 for a first offence and up to €2,000 for a second or subsequent offence.

Section 31 of the Intoxicating Liquor Act 1988, as amended, makes provision for offences relating to the sale and delivery of alcohol products to persons under the age of 18 years. It is an offence under section 31(2) for a licensee to sell or deliver, or to permit any other person to sell or deliver, alcohol products to any person for consumption off his or her licensed premises by a person under the age of 18 years in any place except with the explicit consent of the person's parent or guardian in a private residence in which he or she is present either as of right or with permission. The penalty on conviction for this offence is a fine of up to €1,270 for a first offence and up to €1,904 for a second or subsequent offence. In addition, the Intoxicating Liquor Act 2000 provides for the mandatory temporary closure of licensed premises in cases where a licensee is convicted of an offence under section 31 of the 1988 Act (up to 7 days for a first offence, or at least 7 and not more than 30 days for a second or subsequent offence).

With technology that facilitates video calls being commonplace in the conduct of business in a broad spectrum of contexts such as doctor's surgeries, there do not appear to be any practical impediments to vendors verifying the age of purchasers who purchase alcohol from their homes. The purchase must be completed from their home in advance of delivery.

The Government Alcohol Advisory Group considered specific issues relating to 'distance sales' of intoxicating liquor in its 2008 Report. It took the view that sales of alcohol products which have been ordered by telephone or text messaging and which are paid for on delivery do not comply with licensing law requirements and are, therefore, illegal. The Group recommended that the Gardaí target "dial-a-can" and similar delivery services with a view to prosecuting the offending licensees. Any information concerning transactions of this nature which are contrary to the provisions of the Licensing Acts should, therefore, be brought to the attention of the

Gardaí for investigation and possible prosecution.

In conclusion, there is substantial existing legislation to regulate the delivery of alcohol services in Ireland and, as matters currently stand, I do not propose to introduce new legislation in this area. However, I do appreciate that, with the Covid-19 outbreak, habits of consumers have been affected and the share of purchases online has increased substantially. These changes may be temporary or they may be the beginning of longer term trends. It is perhaps too early to tell what impacts these changes may have and whether increased online sales and delivery of alcohol will, on balance, provide increased convenience and choice to consumers and new revenue streams for small rural pubs or have negative impacts on society that require further regulation. It is in that context that I very much welcome the work being carried out by groups like ICAAN in assisting in the gathering of data in relation to the potential impacts of changes in our society that can help inform an evidence based approach to policy development on these matters.

Protected Disclosures

934. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of protected disclosures being processed by her Department from employees of the Prison Service; the number of disclosures that have been resolved in the course of the process; the number remaining; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15308/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Protected Disclosures Act 2014 came into operation on 15 July 2014 and my Department has a formal Protected Disclosures Policy in place. The Act provides comprehensive protections for workers in both the public and private sectors against penalisation by their employers in circumstances where they have raised concerns about potential wrongdoing.

Those employed in the Irish Prison Service (IPS) may make a protected disclosure either directly to the IPS or to my Department. The Irish Prison Service has a separate Protected Disclosures Policy in place and publishes an annual report on disclosures received in line with the requirements of the Act.

The table below sets out the number of protected disclosures from employees in the Prison Service received by my Department since commencement of the Act. For completeness, information is also included from the IPS in respect of disclosures handled directly.

	Received by the Department of Justice and Equality (since 2015)	Received by the Irish Prison Service
Number of protected disclosures received	38	18
Number resolved	18	8
Number remaining	12	10

Eight potential protected disclosures, relating to the IPS, have been transferred to the IPS to be assessed/investigated under the IPS Protected Disclosures Policy since 2018.

Seized Property

935. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if the moneys that are seized through the proceeds of crime can be ring-fenced and distributed to regions for dispersal to front-line community services that deal directly with the impacts of crimes; her plans on the matter; her views on such proposals; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[15341/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): It is a matter of great importance that the proceeds of the crime are recovered and reinvested back into keeping communities safe. Ireland has a robust legislative framework in place allowing for the freezing, seizure and confiscation of assets that are derived from criminal conduct.

As the Deputy may be aware, responsibility for the identification, tracing, freezing, and ultimate confiscation of criminal assets does not rest with a single body in Ireland and is spread across a number of different agencies and statutory bodies, not all of which are the responsibility of the Department of Justice and Equality. These include An Garda Síochána, the Criminal Assets Bureau, Revenue, the Chief State Solicitors Office, the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Courts. It should be noted that in some cases, funds seized represent overdue/unpaid personal taxation.

I understand that, in accordance with the provisions of the Proceeds of Crime Acts 1996-2016, the Criminal Justice Act 1994, as amended, and related statutes, all confiscations relating to the proceeds of crime are transferred to the Minister for Finance to be paid into, or disposed of, for the benefit of the Exchequer. It is from this central fund which the Government draws for expenditure on all necessary public services and investment including for communities affected by crime. Any change to that process would be a matter for the Departments of Finance and Public Expenditure.

Deportation Orders

936. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the appropriate procedure to be followed in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15351/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The person referred to is the subject of a Deportation Order made on 20 June 2002 and therefore has no entitlement to residency in the State.

Representations were received on behalf of the person concerned pursuant to Section 3 (11) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), to revoke the Deportation Order. Following the consideration of those representations, a decision was taken that the Deportation Order should be affirmed and this decision was communicated to the person concerned by registered post dated 9 November 2017.

It is open to the person concerned to submit further representations requesting that the Deportation Order be revoked, pursuant to Section 3(11) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended). However, I wish to make clear that such an application would require substantial grounds to be successful. To date no such further representations have been received in this case, and consequently the Deportation Order remains valid and in place.

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

937. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if arrangements will be made to review residency entitlements in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15357/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): There is no record of a current application for a certificate of naturalisation from the person referred to by the Deputy. A decision on their previous application issued by letter on 22 October 2018.

A determination on whether an applicant satisfies the statutory criteria attendant to naturalisation can only be made after an application is received. Every application is considered on its individual merits, regardless of whether the applicant had applied previously.

It is open to any individual to lodge an application for a certificate of naturalisation if and when they are in a position to meet the statutory requirements as prescribed in the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956, as amended. The fact that a person may have had an application refused does not preclude or disqualify them from submitting a fresh application in the future. Indeed, the letter advising an applicant of a negative decision also informs them that they may re-apply for the grant of a certificate of naturalisation at any time. The letter advises that, when considering making such a re-application, they should give due regard to the reasons for the refusal which were contained in the submission attached to the refusal letter and that any further application will be considered taking into account all statutory and administrative conditions applicable at the time of application.

Section 15 of the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act, 1956, as amended, provides that the Minister may grant a certificate of naturalisation if, among other things, that the applicant has been resident in the State for a period of one year immediately prior to the date of application and four years in the eight year period before that. For the purpose of calculating this residency, no period may be taken into account where a non-national;

- was required to have the permission of the Minister to remain in the State but did not have that permission; or
- had permission to remain for the purpose of study (whether or not such study necessitated the employment of the non-national during the whole or part of the period of study); or
- had permission to remain for the purpose of seeking to be recognised as a refugee (within the meaning of the Refugee Act, 1996) where such application was either unsuccessful or withdrawn.

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 I know the Deputy will appreciate that it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

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.

Road Traffic Offences

938. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of drivers stopped and reported for driving without insurance, tax, an up to date NCT and speeding on roads in County Kerry in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; and the number of instances in which fines were issued in tabular form. [15393/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): It is important to note that the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management and control of An Garda Síochána. This includes responsibility for all Garda operations, including stopping and reporting drivers for driving without insurance, tax, an up to date NCT and speeding. I, as Minister, have no role in these matters.

I am, however, informed by the Garda authorities that the table below contains details of the number of Fixed Charge Notices issued in the Kerry Division in 2018, 2019 and up until 30 June, 2020.

Kerry Division	2018	2019	2020 (Until 30/06)
Speeding FCNs	3,552	4,108	1,748
NCT Cert FCNs	166	186	60
Tax/Insurance FCNs	1,250	975	469

I am informed that these figures are as recorded on the Fixed Charge Processing System as of 10th July, 2020. They are solely based on Fixed Charge Notices issued during the time periods examined and do not contain summonses, charges or any other form of reporting. The Speeding FCNs are a combined total of both Intercept and Non-Intercept Speeding offences.

Direct Provision System

939. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of persons in direct provision centres both permanent and temporary in County Wicklow; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15418/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Grand Hotel is currently the only permanent accommodation centre in County Wicklow and, as of 5 July 2020, is accommodating 87 residents.

In order to protect the identity of international protection applicants, my Department does not disclose the location of emergency accommodation centres. However, I can confirm that as of 5 July 2020, there are 198 persons living in emergency accommodation in County Wicklow.

My Department is working very hard to ensure that residents in emergency accommodation are re-accommodated in a dedicated accommodation centres as quickly as possible.

Direct Provision System

940. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of phone calls received by a freephone helpline (details supplied) from residents in direct provision centres in County Wicklow; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15419/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): A confidential Freephone telephone support service, funded by but independent of my Department, was established in

May 2020 to provide further support to residents in both permanent and temporary accommodation centres during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This Freephone helpline is operated by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). As the service is confidential, the data from the calls is not disaggregated either by centre or by county.

Since the commencement of the service on 20 May, the helpline has received 175 individual calls. The table below provides a summary of calls received for the reporting period 20 May 2020 to 30 June 2020.

Summary of Helpline Calls Received 20/05/2020 - 30/06/2020

	No.
Number of Helpline Contacts	175
Queries Resolved on Call	75
Queries Requiring Follow Up	100

A total of 5 JRS operators were available on a rotational basis during this time, working on the helpline at the following times:

Monday: 10AM – 1PM / 2PM – 4PM

Tuesday: 10AM – 1PM / 2PM – 4PM

Thursday: 10AM – 1PM / 2PM – 4PM

Friday: 10AM – 1PM / 2PM – 4PM

A voicemail service is available outside of these days and times with calls returned during working hours.

Immigration Policy

941. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality her plans to introduce a scheme to help regularise undocumented workers within the State; the proposed timeline for introducing such a scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15428/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Immigration Service Delivery function of my Department examines each case of an undocumented or illegal person in the State on a case-by-case basis and has consistently urged anyone in this position to come forward if they wish to apply to regularise their position in the State. A pragmatic approach is taken in relation to each case, which is considered on its individual merits.

The Programme for Government contains a commitment to create new pathways for long-term undocumented people and their dependents meeting specified criteria to regularise their status within 18 months of the formation of the Government, bearing in mind European Union and Common Travel Area commitments. 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.

A policy paper on the matter is being drafted by my officials at the present time. This will include an assessment of international best practices.

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

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contact my Department or their local immigration office and to take all appropriate steps to regularise their own and their family's status.

Prisoner Welfare

942. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the timeline for the publication of the self-harm in Irish prisons 2018 report (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15535/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): Provision of safe and secure custody and dignity of care to persons in the penal system in Ireland is a priority for me as Minister and for the Irish Prison Service. Safe and secure custody is one of the key pillars of the Prison Service Strategic Plan 2019-2022.

I am advised by the Irish Prison Service that the self-harm in Irish prisons 2018 report will be published before the end of July 2020. This will be the second annual report detailing all episodes of self-harm by persons in the custody of the Prison Service.

Prisoner Data

943. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of recorded self-harm incidents in prisons by gender from 12 March 2020 to date in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15536/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): I am advised by the Irish Prison Service that there were 36 reported incidents of self harm across the prison estate from 12 March 2020 to the end of June 2020. I am further informed that 33 of these reported incidents occurred within the male prison population and three within the female population. It is important to note that these are provisional figures as the full analysis of such incidents has not yet begun.

I would like to assure the Deputy that provision of safe and secure custody and dignity of care to persons in the penal system in Ireland is a priority for me as Minister and for the Irish Prison Service. Safe and secure custody is one of the key pillars of the Prison Service Strategic Plan 2019-2022.

The Irish Prison Service has during the Covid-19 pandemic introduced a number of new initiatives to assist and safeguard the welfare of those in custody. Measures to allow prisoners maintain contact with families and benefit from family support include:

- provision of additional phone calls for prisoners;
- introduction of Electronic Funds Transfer and An Post Bill Pay service to allow families to continue to lodge money to prisoner accounts; and
- introduction of virtual visits, through the installation of video phone facilities in all prisons to allow for video-calls with families.

In addition, a national telephone helpline has been established to support access for prisoners to IASIO Resettlement, Chaplaincy, Psychology and Merchants Quay Ireland by telephone.

I can further inform the Deputy that the Prison Service Psychology Service provides a plat-

form to listen and support prisoners to mind their psychological well-being. I am informed that the Psychology Service has adapted its services to ensure ongoing support to prisoners and that tele-psychology has been introduced to all prisoners in custody. This typically consists of 20 minute telephone sessions. Support may be offered within the framework of Psychological First Aid or within other relevant psychological frameworks. The goal is to help prisoners feel safe, reduce stress, restore rest and sleep, and connect them to social support.

Prisoner Data

944. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of successful family video visits per prison that have taken place for prisoners and their families since the measure was introduced as an alternative to prison visits during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15537/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will appreciate, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic a range of measures including restrictions on access to prisons have required to protect our prison population, in line with public health advice.

While physical family visits to prisons were suspended on 27 March 2020, I understand that the Prison Service introduced a number of new initiatives to allow families to continue to communicate and support those in custody including:

- provision of additional phone calls for prisoners;
- introduction of Electronic Funds Transfer and An Post Bill Pay service to allow families to continue to lodge money to prisoner accounts; and
- introduction of virtual visits, through the installation of video phone facilities in all prisons to allow for video-calls with families.

I am informed that feedback from prisoners and families that have used the new video visits system successfully has been very positive.

Given that this was a new service, and particularly given that it was introduced as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions, I understand there were a number of challenges and technical issues at the outset with some connections. A dedicated helpline for the families of prisoners who were experiencing difficulty in connecting to a scheduled video call was established and is still in operation.

I am informed by the Irish Prison Service in the last six weeks, an average of 1,647 video calls per week have been scheduled, with an 87% success rate. Reasons for unsuccessful calls include a breakdown in the line, end user issues and broadband connections.

I am informed that while video visits began on 11 April 2020, statistics are available only from 26 May 2020. Details of the number of family visits via video link between 26 May and 7 July 2020, as furnished to me by the Prison Service, are set out in the following table.

Location	Number of Scheduled Calls	Number of Successful Calls	Number of Unsuccessful Calls
Arbour Hill	312	289	23
Castlerea	437	383	54
Cloverhill	665	581	84
Cork	663	597	66

Location	Number of Scheduled Calls	Number of Successful Calls	Number of Unsuccessful Calls
Dochas	482	439	43
Limerick	692	575	117
Loughan House	194	163	31
Midlands	2375	2165	210
Mountjoy	952	815	137
Portlaoise	867	787	80
Shelton Abbey	262	236	26
Wheatfield	1978	1567	411
Total	9879	8597	1282

Finally, I note that the Irish Prison Service has outlined plans for a phased recommencement of physical family visits to prisons commencing on Monday 20 July 2020. Visits will recommence on a phased basis and movement through the phases will be subject to ongoing risk assessment and will take account latest public health advice, the range of Government restrictions in place and other factors including the prevailing transmission rate in the community.

In addition, given the success of the video visits system, I understand that the Prison Service intends to continue to offer video visits for families and friends and hopes to continue to enhance this new service in the future.

Prisoner Data

945. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number and percentage of persons in prison on a weekly basis during the Covid-19 pandemic cocooning, quarantining and self-isolating; if a description of each associated regime will be provided; the number of hours spent out of cell of each; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15538/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and as the Deputy will appreciate, a wide range of measures have been required to protect our prison population, in line with public health advice. I have previously set out detail on the measures adopted to address the risk presented by Covid-19 in a prison environment, guided by the advice of NPHET and consistent with the prison-specific guidance of the World Health Organisation (WHO). Measures adopted included:

- reduction of prisoner numbers through use of temporary release of low-risk prisoners, following case-by-case assessment;

- 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 video visits;

- quarantining for 14 days of all newly committed prisoners; isolation of suspected case or prisoners with symptoms; and “cocooning” of vulnerable prisoners;

- comprehensive training for IPS staff and the provision of appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) across the prison estate; and

- establishment of a robust contact tracing model which has been acknowledged by the

WHO as best practice.

I am pleased to say that to date there has been no prisoner case of Covid-19 in Irish prisons. Nevertheless the risk continues and must be managed.

In relation to the categories of prisoners referred to by the Deputy, I can say the following.

First, in relation to cocooning: in line with the position at the time in the wider community, the Prison Service operated a regime whereby all prisoners aged 70 years or more and prisoners deemed medically vulnerable due to specific serious underlying medical conditions were cocooned in the prisons in which they were detained. These cocooning prisoners were removed from free association, but could associate with one another in dedicated areas. I am informed that the practice of cocooning has now ceased in prisons, in line with the general easing of relevant public health restrictions in the community. However prisoners formerly cocooning were offered the option of a restricted regime at their own request.

In relation to isolation, I am advised that any prisoner who informs staff that they are experiencing symptoms of Covid-19 is immediately assessed by prison healthcare staff, who arrange for the prisoner to be isolated and tested. I am further informed that any prisoner who has had contact with another person who has been tested for Covid-19 and is awaiting results is also isolated from the prison population, while they are tested and awaiting the results of said test.

In addition, all prisoners newly committed to prison are placed in quarantine for 14 days before being transferred into general population. This measure is in place to reduce the risk that a new committal who might be incubating the virus could spread Covid-19 into the general prison population.

I am informed by the Prison Service that it is not possible to provide a breakdown of the out-of-cell hours for each of these groups of prisoners, as they vary on a daily basis and for a variety of reasons including for example the number of prisoners involved, the number of staff available, and differences in physical layout of each prison.

However I am advised that any prisoners who were cocooning as well as those in quarantine continue to have access to a wide range of services and facilities within the prison. These facilities include psychological support, phone calls, television, tuck shop and chaplaincy services. I understand that particular efforts have also been made to ensure that prisoners could communicate with their families, through increased provision of telephone services and video visits. The Deputy will appreciate that for medical and infection control reasons, those prisoners in isolation due to suspected or symptoms of infection were on a more restrictive form of regime, while the testing process was completed.

The Irish Prison Service began to collate specific figures of the type referred to by the Deputy from 27 April 2020 onwards. The following table, furnished to me by the Irish Prison Service sets out the details requested by the Deputy for the period from 27 April to 3 July 2020 (percentages rounded).

[Covid-19 Data]

Prisoner Data

946. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the daily average number of hours the mainstream prison population were held in their cells in April, May

and June 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15539/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The provision of safe and secure custody and dignity of care to persons in the penal system in Ireland is a priority for me as Minister and for the Irish Prison Service.

The Deputy will appreciate that a wide range of measures were necessary to address the particular risks posed by the Covid-19 pandemic in the context of prisons. The measures adopted by the Prison Service were in keeping with the advice of NPET and the prison-specific guidance of the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Some of these measures included cocooning of vulnerable prisoners and isolation of prisoners in circumstances including display of symptoms of the virus. These and other measures adopted on the context of the pandemic can be expected to have had an impact on the out of cell times of some prisoners.

However I am informed by the Irish Prison Service that it does not hold information in the particular format requested by the Deputy and that it is not possible to provide exact figures on the out-of-cell time in each prison, as this may change on a daily basis.

For the Deputy's information, the following table, furnished to me by the Irish Prison Service, sets out indicative out-of-cell times for the general prison population across the prison estate.

Prison	Indicative out-of-cell times for the general prison population
Arbour Hill	8
Castlerea	5
Cloverhill	5.4
Cork	5
Limerick	8
Loughan House	Full day out-of-cell time
Midlands	5.5
Mountjoy Male	4.5
Mountjoy Female	5
Portlaoise	6
Shelton Abbey	Full day out-of-cell time
Wheatfield	7

Legal Aid

947. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if she will expand the criteria of the means test for civil legal aid; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15567/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The statutory position regarding the provision of civil legal aid derives from the Civil Legal Aid Act 1995 under which the Legal Aid Board was established as the statutory provider of legal aid through the civil legal aid scheme.

To qualify for full legal aid under the scheme, an applicant must satisfy both a means test and a merits test. Approximately two thirds of the cases dealt with by the Legal Aid Board, under the civil legal aid scheme, are connected with family law matters.

The Legal Aid Board reviews the operation of the civil legal aid scheme and submits proposals to my Department for consideration on an ongoing basis. My Department works with the Legal Aid Board in evaluating these proposals with the aim of optimising the ability of the board to provide civil legal aid to persons of insufficient means.

I would also like to draw the Deputy's attention to the fact that comprehensive proposals for a modernisation and reform of the family court system, which include the preparation of a Family Court Bill, are being developed by my Department. Those proposals will involve a broad consideration as to the best means of providing access to various family law mechanisms available to those families involved in private family law cases. That consideration will also allow for an examination of the recommendation contained in the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality Report on Reform of the Family Law System concerning the need for a full review of the legal aid scheme.

Gambling Sector

948. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if she will establish a gambling regulator with the powers to regulate advertising; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15572/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Programme for Government provides for the establishment of a gambling regulator focused on public safety and wellbeing, covering gambling online and in person, and the powers to regulate advertising, gambling websites and apps.

At present, the general regulation of advertising in the media is a matter for the Advertising Standards Authority of Ireland and the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. The details of how a new gambling regulator might operate specific advertising regulations for the gambling industry, will be informed by the Report of the Inter-Departmental Working Group on the Future Licencing and Regulation of Gambling, approved by Government on 20 March, 2019. This report is published on my Department's website. Chapter 4 of that report considered the future approach to regulating advertising, sponsorship and promotion of gambling products and the various issues involved.

As outlined in the Report of the Working Group, devising and implementing a modern licensing and regulatory regime for the Irish gambling industry presents this State with a significant challenge. It will be a substantial task, given the size, complexity and technological development of the modern gambling industry in Ireland. Furthermore, there is a need to overhaul the current outdated and complex arrangements whereby responsibility for licensing and regulating gambling activities is shared between a number of departments and agencies.

Work is currently under way in my Department on the development of the legislation to provide for the necessary modern licencing and regulatory provisions.

Naturalisation Applications

949. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if and when naturalisation will be awarded in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15590/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): An application for a cer-

tificate of naturalisation from the person referred to continues to be 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.

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. 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 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.

European Court of Justice Rulings

950. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the impact the EU Court of Justice ruling C-335/17 has had on Irish legislation; her plans to update legislation to bring it into line with the ruling; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15638/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The judgment of the European Court of Justice in Case C-335/17 relates to a request for a preliminary ruling under Article 267 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union from the Varhoven Kasatsionen Sad (Supreme Court of Cassation, Bulgaria). The request for a preliminary ruling was made in relation to the interpretation of Council Regulation (EC) No 2201/2003 of 27 November 2003 concerning jurisdiction and the recognition and enforcement of judgments in matrimonial matters and the matters of parental responsibility (the Brussels IIA Regulation). The ECJ judgment confirms that the Brussels IIA Regulation applies to cases concerning rights of access to a child by a wide family circle including the child's grandparents and that, according to Article 8 of that Regulation, jurisdiction to examine such an application lies with the courts of the Member State in which the child was habitually resident at the time when the court was seized.

The Brussels IIA Regulation has direct effect in Irish law, with the European Communities (Judgments in Matrimonial Matters and Matters of Parental Responsibility) Regulations 2005 (S.I. No. 112 of 2005) making necessary provision for the good administration of the Regulation. The Irish courts will take consideration of the Regulation in cases where there is any dispute as to which Member State has jurisdiction to hear an application to which the Regulation applies.

The ECJ judgment has no effect on Irish legislation. The Deputy may wish to note that the Children and Family Relationships Act 2015 is a child-centred Act which implemented reforms in family law to recognise the crucial role of parents and other relatives, including grandparents, in a child's life.

The 2015 Act extensively amended the Guardianship of Infants Act 1964 in relation to guardianship, custody and access. A grandparent or other relative may apply to court for cus-

tody of a child where he or she is an adult who has undertaken the child's day to day care for more than 12 months and the child has no parent or guardian willing or able to act as guardian. The 2015 Act has also made it easier for relatives of a child, such as grandparents, to apply to court under section 11B of the 1964 Act to have access to children.

Section 25 of the Guardianship of Infants Act 1964 requires the court, as it thinks appropriate and practicable, to take into account the child's wishes in custody and access matters, having regard to the age and understanding of the child.

Section 3 of the Guardianship of Infants Act 1964 provides that the best interests of the child shall be the paramount consideration for the court to take into account in any proceedings where access to a child is in question. It is a matter for the courts, when making decisions on access, to determine the best interests of the child and to decide whether or not to make an order regarding access to the child.

EU Legislation

951. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality when she plans to transpose Council Framework Decision 2008/829/JHA and Council Decision 2008/909/JHA into Irish law as required, particularly as Council Framework Decision 2008/829/JHA was, under EU law, required to be transposed by 1 December 2012; the reason for the delay in complying with EU law in this regard; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15658/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): First and in relation to Council Framework Decision 2008/829/JHA on the cross-border recognition of decisions on supervision measures as an alternative to provisional detention, I can inform the Deputy that transposition is well advanced through the drafting and publication of the Criminal Justice (Mutual Recognition of Decisions on Supervision Measures) Bill 2019 ("the 2019 Bill").

The 2019 Bill is detailed and technical and represents a straightforward transposition of Framework Decision 2009/829/JHA. It had already completed its passage through the Seanad by October 2019 and had been scheduled for Committee stage in the Dáil when the election was called for February. Restoration of this Bill has been sought and further progress will then be dependent on Oireachtas scheduling.

Second, in relation to of Council Framework Decision 2008/909/JHA relating to the mutual recognition of judgments in criminal matters imposing custodial sentences or measures involving deprivation of liberty, I can confirm that transposition is being progressed with drafting of the Criminal Justice (Mutual Recognition of Custodial Sentences) Bill.

The Government approved the General Scheme and drafting of this Bill recently, on 12 June. It is now with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel (OPC) for drafting. Bearing in mind the significant assistance which the OPC provided to my Department in the preparation of the General Scheme, I hope that speedy drafting of the Bill for publication will be possible.

I am keen that both pieces of legislation will progress as quickly as possible.

Visa Applications

952. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if the processing of family visit and spouse visas for those visiting loved ones here has returned to full functionality, that is, if they are being applied for and issued through the normal channels; if

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not, the estimated timeframe for returning to full functionality; if the time permitted for visits will be adjusted to account for 14 days of self-isolation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15723/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Government is advising against non-essential travel until further notice and anyone entering the State is required to self-isolate for 14 days. All passengers are also required to complete a mandatory Public Health Passenger Locator Form on arrival.

From Monday 22 June 2020, my Department has resumed the acceptance of visa applications in our Dublin office as well as in seven locations overseas where we have visa offices - China, India, UAE, Turkey, Nigeria, Russia and the United Kingdom.

There are still travel and social distancing restrictions in place in some of these countries so where it was not possible to resume from 22 June 2020, we intend to resume accepting visa applications as soon as possible thereafter. The extent of the resumption of visa services will continue to be decided in accordance with World Health Organisation (WHO) and Health Service Executive (HSE) guidelines.

During the initial phase of re-opening, my Department is accepting Long Stay 'D' visa applications as well as those identified under our current criteria as Emergency/Priority Short Stay visas. All other short stay visit applications are not yet being accepted and therefore the issue of time permitted for visits does not arise at present.

A Frequently Asked Questions document on the impact of COVID-19 on immigration and international protection is available on the Immigration Service website (www.inis.gov.ie). This document is regularly updated. Additionally any person intending to travel should also take note of the General COVID-19 Travel Advisory issued by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Deportation Orders

953. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality when a decision will be made on the residency status of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15728/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): I can confirm that Deportation Orders were signed in respect of the persons concerned and they were removed from the State in 2012.

On 9 August 2018, representations were received from the persons concerned pursuant to Section 3(11) of the Immigration Act, 1999, (as amended) seeking to revoke the Deportation Orders. These representations were fully considered and the earlier decision to make Deportation Orders remains unchanged.

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.

Garda Strength

954. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason for the significant drop in the number of community gardaí in the DMR district, in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the total force in the district; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15840/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will appreciate, in accordance with the Garda Síochána Act 2005 as amended, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and controlling the administration and business of An Garda Síochána. Further, the allocation of Garda resources is made in light of identified operational demand. This includes deployment of personnel among the various Garda Divisions. As Minister, I have no direct role in the matter.

I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps this distribution of resources under continual review in the context of policing priorities and crime trends, to ensure their optimum use. I understand that it is a matter for the Divisional Chief Superintendent to determine the optimum distribution of duties among the personnel available to him or her, having regard to the profile of each area within the Division and its specific needs.

To date, the official categorisation as a Community Garda has simply referred to those who are exclusively assigned to building relationships with local communities and civil society including giving talks to schools, community groups and others. However, it is important to note that community policing is at the heart of An Garda Síochána and that all Gardaí have a role to play in community policing in carrying out their duties.

I understand that the Deputy has clarified that his question relates to DMR North. I can confirm that as at the 31st May 2020, the latest date for which figures are available, there were 801 Gardaí assigned to the DMR North. This compares to a figure of 753 on 31st December 2019. Of this total, there were 11 Community Gardaí assigned to DMR North as of 31st May, compared to 39 on 31st December. However, as the Deputy will be aware, as of 16th March 2020, a Contingency Roster was introduced into An Garda Síochána owing to the COVID-19 Pandemic. I am informed by the Garda authorities that in order to maximise the availability of resources, members attached to Community Policing were allocated to the Core Roster or the Supplementary Units. This provision will continue until September 2020.

I am further informed however that the expected abstraction rate by COVID-19 did not occur within An Garda Síochána, and therefore the organisation maintained its strength throughout. I am advised that this meant that, in essence, the community Gardaí could still attend to their community functions although the groups with whom they generally engage are not in a position to meet.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Government is currently implementing the recommendations of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland through the four year implementation plan A Policing Service for the Future. In its report, published in September 2018, the Commission outlined a vision and roadmap for strengthening An Garda Síochána and the broader national framework for policing, security and community safety. The report followed extensive consultations with communities and a wide range of stakeholders over fifteen months.

A key commitment in A Policing Service for the Future is the rollout of An Garda Síochána’s new Operating Model. The Garda Operating Model reorganises resources around the delivery of frontline policing, placing an increased emphasis on engaging with communities and supporting victims of crime. I am informed by the Garda Commissioner that in each Division, there

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will be a dedicated Superintendent leading a community engagement team. I am confident that this reorganisation will further strengthen community policing and engagement, and provide a more localised, responsive policing service for each Division nationwide.

In a broader sense, the Deputy might also wish to note that implementation of A Policing Service for the Future will see the Garda Síochána Act 2005 repealed and replaced by a Policing and Community Safety Act. My Department is progressing work on the preparation of a Policing and Community Safety Bill as a matter of priority.

In addition to setting out a new governance and oversight framework for policing, it will redefine the functions of An Garda Síochána to include prevention of harm to those who are vulnerable, place an obligation on relevant state agencies to cooperate with An Garda Síochána in relation to the broader issue of community safety and refine local structures supporting local accountability for policing. In that context, my Department is currently in the process of finalising the most appropriate model to achieve this. All existing structures and approaches to community safety have been considered as part of this work and in line with the recommendation of the Commission on the Future of Policing that community policing and community engagement should be at the heart of new structures and policing arrangements.

As I have indicated to the Deputy, work is well advanced on the preparation of the General Scheme of the Bill. Once it is finalised, I intend to bring it before the Government for approval and publication in the normal manner.

Inspector of Prisons

955. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the estimated cost in 2021 if the budget for the Inspector of Prisons increased by 50%. [15937/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Inspector of Prisons, whose independence in the exercise of her functions is provided for by law, plays a vital role in ensuring effective independent oversight of our prison system. The main function of the Inspector of Prisons is to carry out regular inspections of prisons and places of detention in Ireland. The Inspector also investigates deaths of prisoners in custody and has oversight of the prisoner complaints procedure in the Irish Prison Service.

I was pleased to see an increase in the budget for the Office of the Inspector of Prisons of €0.7m in Budget 2020, bringing the total allocation to €1.2 million. This total allocation represented an increase of over 140% compared to the Office's budget in 2019.

On the basis of the current budget, a 50% increase would cost €600,000 and bring the total budget to €1.8 million. However, and as the Deputy will appreciate, the 2021 budget for the Inspector of Prisons will be costed in the normal manner and considered as part of the normal estimates process later this year.

Garda Data

956. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of 1200cc, 1400cc and 1500cc motorcycles in the Garda fleet. [15939/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Deputy will be aware that in accordance with the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for managing and controlling the administration and business of An Garda Síochána. Further,

the allocation of Garda resources is a matter for the Commissioner, in light of identified operational demands. This includes responsibility for the allocation of Garda vehicles among the various Garda divisions. As Minister, I have no role in these matters. I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

I am advised by the Garda Authorities that Fleet Management Section set out a specification for motorcycles in consultation with the advanced motorcycle driving school in the Garda College Templemore. This specification is provided to the OGP for the purposes of a tender competition. At the moment, the current “large bike” is the 1200cc BMW RT1200 RT-P. This is the most common police motorcycle in Europe and falls within AGS’s requirements.

I am further advised that there are currently 48 units of this 1200cc largest motorcycle out of a total motorcycle fleet of 115. There are currently no 1400cc or 1500cc motorcycles within the Garda Fleet.

I would further inform the Deputy 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. 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.

International Protection

957. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality her plans to provide legal advice and-or assistance to persons seeking international protection; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15942/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The State already provides support for all applicants when making an application for international protection. There are specific arrangements for unaccompanied minors who are in the care of Tusla.

International Protection applicants are required to attend for preliminary interview with staff of the International Protection Office (IPO). During this interview the applicant will, where necessary and possible, have the assistance of an interpreter. If the person’s application is deemed to be admissible, the person is given a questionnaire to complete.

All applicants are entitled to free legal aid from the Refugee Legal Service, once they have made an initial application. Civil legal aid and advice for international protection applicants is provided via the Legal Aid Board. Detailed information on civil legal aid services and advice provided to international protection applicants can be found here:

<https://www.legalaidboard.ie/en/our-services/legal-aid-services/services-for-international-protection-applicants/>

Once the completed questionnaire has been submitted to the IPO the applicant will then have a substantive interview and will have the benefit of an interpreter, if required, to ensure they can ably communicate their claim to the interviewer.

If the applicant receives a negative first instance recommendation from the IPO, they can appeal the decision to the International Protection Appeals Tribunal. The applicant is entitled to legal representation during the appeal and consideration of permission to remain in the State.

Forensic Science Ireland

958. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of the provision of a new national forensic science laboratory; the estimated cost of delivery; when the new laboratory will be completed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15981/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy may be aware, Forensic Science Ireland (FSI), an office of my Department, is the State's forensic analysis service and works closely with An Garda Síochána in the investigation of crime and presentation of evidence at criminal trials.

FSI forms a crucial component of the State's criminal justice system and meets a clearly established public need by contributing to the detection of criminal offences and the apprehension and identification of the perpetrators of crime.

The provision of a modern purpose-built Forensic Science Ireland Laboratory has been the subject of discussion and planning for almost 20 years. A proposal, which involves relocating the organisation to a modern purpose-built facility at the State and Agricultural Laboratory complex at Backweston, Co. Kildare, was included in the Public Capital Programme since 2015 and more recently in the National Development Plan. Cabinet gave approval to my predecessor's proposal to proceed with the project on 3rd March 2020.

The main contractor took full possession of the site on 19 March 2020. Work was interrupted by Covid-19 but has since resumed and is proceeding in accordance with the contract. The works over the last number of weeks have consisted primarily of site preparation works, establishment of contractor facilities, foundation works, drainage and preparatory work for hard landscaped areas.

At a cost of €99,518,304 (inclusive of VAT), this new laboratory will provide FSI with a functional, purpose-built facility, achieving best practice standards for evidence processing, analysis and storage. The objective is for a world class facility that meets all relevant standards for FSI's important work. The project represents a significant and important investment in our criminal justice system and is a practical demonstration of the Government's commitment to investing in the fight against crime.

Projections at this time are for a two year build with completion by July 2022.

Garda Divisional Headquarters

959. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of the provision of new Garda divisional headquarters in Kevin Street and Galway; the estimated cost of their delivery; when they will be completed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15982/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): I can confirm to the Deputy that the new Garda divisional headquarters in Galway and Kevin Street have both been completed and handed over to An Garda Síochána.

I am informed by the OPW that Kevin Street Garda HQ was completed, occupied and operational in spring 2018. The final account was recently agreed for a sum of €31.51m ex VAT. The final account covers the building cost plus full fit out, including specialist areas, excluding only loose furniture.

I am further informed that the Galway Regional HQ was built, occupied and operational in the same time period but that the final account has not yet been agreed

Garda Divisional Headquarters

960. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of the provision of the replacement of the Harcourt Square complex; the estimated cost of delivery; when the new complex will be completed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15983/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): 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, 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 purpose of the ongoing Garda Building and Refurbishment Programme 2016-2021 is to address deficiencies in the Garda estate and provide fit-for-purpose facilities for Garda members and staff as well as the public interacting with them. The programme is based on agreed Garda priorities and includes substantial works at over 30 locations nationwide as well as other works such as cell refurbishment at over 100 locations.

In anticipation of the need to vacate Harcourt Square, the OPW determined, in consultation with An Garda Síochána, that a replacement specialist complex should be constructed that would be purpose-designed, meet Garda requirements, and remain in State ownership. A site identification and selection process was undertaken in 2015, and a preferred state-owned site at Military Road in Dublin 8 was selected.

Work commenced on site on 2 March 2020 with building works expected to be complete within 30 months, upon which it would be handed over to An Garda Síochána to fit out the necessary ICT and furniture requirements. The OPW advises An Garda Síochána that the contract value is €68.8m ex. VAT. While there is a total project budget for this development, the OPW advises that it does not supply details of the total project budget as this figure includes information related to the contingency sum for the project, which would be a commercially sensitive matter.

Similar to most building projects in the State, the Military Road site was closed on 28th March 2020 as a result of COVID-19. Further to the Government announcement of 1st May in relation to the phased return of construction work, the OPW has advised that the site reopened and construction work recommenced on 18th May 2020.

Military Road will not accommodate all Garda Bureaus based at Harcourt Square and OPW is currently working with An Garda Síochána to provide additional accommodation to meet all Garda accommodation requirements arising from the need to vacate Harcourt Square.

Garda Information and Communications Technology

961. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of the Garda ICT programme; the estimated cost of its completion; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15984/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy is aware, under the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for carrying on and managing the administration and business of the organisation as well as for the allocation of Garda resources, in light of identified operational demands. As Minister, I have no role in those matters.

Record resources of €1.88 billion, as well as a substantial capital allocation of €116 million, have been made available to An Garda Síochána in 2020. Very significant capital investment is also being made in An Garda Síochána, including investment of €342 million in Garda ICT infrastructure between 2016 and 2021 and investment of €46 million in the Garda fleet over the same period.

The Garda Commissioner is primarily responsible for the effective and efficient use of these resources and Garda management confirm that a broad range of ICT projects and initiatives are being progressed in that regard.

This capital funding on Garda ICT infrastructure will support existing Garda ICT systems and develop them further, to support the ongoing business requirements of An Garda Síochána and enabling them to deploy the latest, cutting-edge technologies in the fight against crime.

A number of key ICT initiatives are currently moving to implementation phase, including for example projects such as:

- rollout of the Rosters and Duty Management System, which will give supervisors better and faster information on the resources available to them;
- phased implementation of the Mobility project, which aims to provide operational Garda members with secure mobile access to Garda systems along with Garda Apps including in particular in relation to roads;
- rollout on a pilot basis of the Investigations Management System, which will standardise, digitise and support the management of all investigations arising from a PULSE incident; and
- staged deployment of a new national Computer Aided Dispatch System, to capture emergency calls and dispatch of resources to the incident.

Prison Building Programme

962. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of the redevelopment of Limerick Prison; the estimated cost of delivery; when it will be completed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15985/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): Provision of safe and secure custody and dignity of care to persons in the penal system in Ireland is a priority for me as Minister and for the Irish Prison Service. Delivery of the Limerick Prison redevelopment project is a key part of ongoing work in relation to the prison estate and is reflected in the Prison Service Strategic Plan 2019-2022.

I am advised by the Irish Prison Service that the redevelopment works currently in progress at Limerick Prison include:

- A new accommodation block for male prisoners and all necessary rehabilitative support facilities to assist prisoners to reintegrate into society on release from custody;

- A new stand-alone accommodation unit for female prisoners, including all necessary support facilities;
- A new gate house and vehicle lock and offices for the Prison Service Escort Corps;
- New visit facilities and exercise yards, astro turf pitch; and
- New offices for the Probation Service.

The total project budget is €71.5 million. I understand that the contract for the construction of these works was awarded in February 2019 and that the project is currently scheduled for completion in the last quarter of 2021.

I am informed that, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the project was on time and on budget. However the Deputy will appreciate that temporary suspension of construction work was necessary earlier this year in light of the pandemic and that it is possible that public health guidelines on safe working may have an impact on work at the site in future. As a result, the precise date for completion of the project is currently the subject of ongoing discussions with the contractor.

I am confident that when the project is completed, it will represent another important milestone in the modernisation of the prison estate, following on from the construction of the new prison facilities in Cork.

Prison Building Programme

963. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of the redevelopment of the Mountjoy Prison campus; the estimated cost of delivery; when it will be completed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15986/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): Provision of safe and secure custody and dignity of care to persons in the penal system in Ireland is a priority for me as Minister and for the Irish Prison Service.

I am advised by the Irish Prison Service that a major programme of work was undertaken at Mountjoy Prison over a 5-year period and completed in 2016, with the primary objective of installing in-cell sanitation, and ending the practice of “slopping out”. I understand that in addition to this urgent work, the opportunity was taken to upgrade the fabric and conditions of the cell accommodation and provide new facilities including for computer training, construction studies, industrial cleaning, fabric workshops and carpentry/joinery workshops and additional indoor recreation facilities.

I am further informed that the closure of the former St. Patrick’s Institution, located on the Mountjoy Prison campus, enabled the redesignation of that facility as part of Mountjoy Prison providing single cell occupancy and use as a progression unit for the rehabilitation of prisoners.

In addition, I understand that a major capital project was undertaken at the Dóchas Centre, completed in December 2018, which involved the refurbishment of 28 bedrooms, associated circulation spaces and shared social rooms.

I further understand that the Training Unit located on the Mountjoy prison campus was temporarily closed in 2017, to facilitate its repurposing as a facility for older prisoners in recognition of their unique health, welfare and occupational needs. The work was substantially completed in December 2019 but I understand that in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, a decision was taken to defer the reopening of the Unit and instead to keep it in reserve should

it be required in response to the pandemic. I am informed by the Irish Prison Service that the reopening of the Training Unit is being kept under constant review in light of contingency planning requirements related to the pandemic.

Other than those works which have already been completed and as the Deputy will appreciate, the National Development Plan under Project Ireland 2040 references the future redevelopment of the Mountjoy Prison campus, to be undertaken on a phased basis over the period 2021 to 2031.

I am informed that a masterplan for the redevelopment of the Mountjoy complex was formulated over the period 2014-2016 and that a preliminary costing exercise undertaken in 2016 estimated the cost of the project at approximately €63 million. A further review of the project in 2018 estimated the cost in excess of €70 million to include professional fees, together with the full range of technical, environmental, geotechnical, conservation reports etc commensurate with a project of this scale and cognisant of the historical nature of Mountjoy Prison.

All options regarding the future redevelopment of Mountjoy Prison are being kept under review, having regard to budgetary and operational requirements as well as the extensive work undertaken at the Mountjoy Prison campus as I have outlined it above.

The Deputy will also appreciate that the Programme for Government includes a commitment to take a comprehensive approach to the development of the next Capital Strategy for the Irish Prison Service, to ensure the availability of modern detention facilities with adequate capacity.

Court Accommodation

964. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the status of the redevelopment of the Family Law and Children's Court complex on Hammond Lane, Dublin 7; the estimated cost of delivery; when it will be completed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15987/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): Under the provisions of the Courts Service Act 1998, management of the courts, including the provision of accommodation for court sittings, is the responsibility of the Courts Service which is independent in exercising its functions.

The Programme for Government contains a commitment to build a new Family Law Court building in Dublin and ensure that court facilities across the country are suitable for family law hearings, so that these hearings can be held separately from other cases.

The total capital budget for the Courts Service in 2020 is €66.017 million, €15.380 million of which will be allocated for courthouse capital works for a variety of courthouses around the country and which will also allow for ongoing preparatory work on a dedicated Dublin Family Court complex on Hammond Lane. My Department has, working with the Courts Service, been able to secure sufficient additional funding to allow the Hammond Lane Project to go ahead.

While I can't confirm exact figures as the future project will have to go to public tender, it will provide enough to deliver a modern, fit for purpose family court in Dublin.

This New Family Courts Project in Hammond Lane will be an important step towards reforming the family courts system in Ireland. I hope to bring my proposals to modernise the family justice system to Government in the coming weeks.

Departmental Funding

965. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the ceiling for capital investment in her Department for 2021, 2022 and 2023; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [15988/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): The ceiling for capital investment for the Justice Sector is €208m for 2021, and €216m in 2022. The allocations for 2023 have not yet been agreed with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

Increased levels of public investment in the Justice Sector are a critical foundation of the National Development Plan 2018-2027. Notable areas of capital investment for the sector over the course of the plan include:

- Forensic Science Laboratory
- Garda Divisional Headquarters in Kevin Street and Galway
- Replacement of the Harcourt Square Complex
- Garda Station Building and Refurbishment Programme
- Garda ICT Programme
- New or refurbished courthouses in a number of provincial cities and county towns
- Redevelopment of Limerick Prison
- Development of Mountjoy Prison Campus
- Family Law and Children's Court Complex on Hammond Lane

The plan also recognises that increased population growth in the next ten years as envisaged under the National Planning Framework will create new demands in terms of the current accommodation stock across the sector including in relation to policing, prisons and courts.

My Department is also developing its analytical capability to be better placed to predict future trends including demographic changes and thus better inform both policy developments and budgetary requirements in the years ahead.

Immigration Status

966. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the reason for the delay for a review by the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service, INIS, of the EU treaty rights of a person (details supplied) who has applied for citizenship. [16027/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): An EU Treaty Rights review application was received from the person referred to by the Deputy in December 2017 and is due to be considered in the coming weeks. This review is in respect of a negative decision made on an application for retention of a residence card as a family member of an EU citizen. The length of time it takes to process applications may vary depending on a number of factors, including the volume of applications on hand.

The Immigration Service Delivery of my Department has unfortunately been experiencing delays due to the COVID-19 crisis and staff have very limited access to their offices and to the

relevant case files. However, it is expected that the person concerned should receive a determination on their application within the next four weeks.

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.

Crime Data

967. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the incidence of dog thefts reported to An Garda Síochána in 2019 and the first six months of 2020, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16099/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): I am informed by the Garda authorities that the following are the approximate number of dogs reported stolen in 2019 and to the 30th June 2020:

Year	2019	2020 (to 30 June)
Number of dogs stolen	205	76

I am further advised that these figures are approximate as they are based on descriptions given on the PULSE system.

As the Deputy may be aware, on 9 July 2020, An Garda Síochána appealed to the public to take extra crime prevention measures when it comes to caring for their pets, particularly high-value breeds of dogs, following the reporting of a number of dog thefts in recent months. A range of measures for pet safety, recommended by the National Crime Prevention Unit, can be found on the Garda website at <https://www.garda.ie/en/about-us/our-departments/office-of-corporate-communications/news-media/dog-theft-crime-prevention-advice.html>.

Visa Applications

968. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality if an appointments system will be instituted in Anglesea Street, Cork, for the renewal of visas rather than a queuing system in view of social distancing concerns; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16114/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): My Department registers persons residing in the Dublin area only. The Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) processes all applications outside of Dublin through the Garda Station network.

I am informed that An Garda Síochána, Cork City Division is very conscious of the risks involved in a queuing system in view of social distancing concerns. The health and safety of the public and that of Garda personnel will be prioritised at all times.

In the context of COVID-19 public health considerations, alternative arrangements to the queuing system have been put in place at the Immigration office at Cork City Divisional HQ in Anglesea Street. The renewal process will be electronic as far as possible, and where the applicant is required to attend the Immigration Office in person to verify their identity, appointments

will be arranged by email by the staff at Anglesea Street Garda Station. It is anticipated that the office will re-open in line with public health guidelines on 20 July 2020. Additional resources have been allocated to the office by the Garda authorities and extended opening times are being considered. In the interest of public health, applicants will not be seen without an appointment. Cork City Divisional Immigration Unit staff at Cork Airport will also provide relevant information to incoming applicants.

Inquiries regarding the new arrangements can be emailed to the Anglesea Street Office at CorkCity.Registration@garda.ie. Information on the new arrangements will also be issued by An Garda Síochána in the coming days to the relevant stakeholders: immigration bodies, universities and colleges and employers.

Public Inquiries

969. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Justice and Equality the number of tribunals, public investigations and commissions of investigations in process; the length of time each has been under way; when each will conclude; the cost to date of each; and the estimated cost of each at completion. [16137/20]

Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee): It has not been possible to collate the information requested by the Deputy within the time allowed. I will write to the Deputy to provide this information when it is available.

Human Rights

970. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the challenges faced by LGBTQ parents due to the lack of legal recognition for both parents; his plans to address these issues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14677/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Children and Family Relationships Act 2015 represents one of the most significant changes in family law in a generation. It aims to reform family law in a way that is inclusive of, and sensitive to, the reality of contemporary family life in Ireland. It attempts to better reflect this reality by meeting the needs of children living in diverse family types. Parts 2 & 3 of the Act of 2015 contain provisions relating to the regulation of donor-assisted human reproduction (DAHR) procedures carried out in the State. This covers situations where the child born as a result of that procedure is born in the State and where the intending mother carries the pregnancy and gives birth to the child. The recent commencement of Parts 2 & 3 of the Children and Family Relationships Act 2015 (as amended) on 4 May 2020 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 (AHR) involving donated eggs or sperm or embryos.

People can also acquire rights in respect of their children through guardianship or step-adoption. Under section 6C of the Guardianship of Infants Act 1964 (as amended) – which was inserted by section 49 of the Children and Family Relationships Act 2015 – a spouse, civil partner or cohabitant (who has co-habited with the other parent for over three years), can apply for guardianship provided they have shared parenting responsibility for the child for over two years. The applicant applies to the District Court for guardianship. Issues relating to guardianship rights generally are the responsibility of the Minister for Justice.

In addition, it may be possible for the spouse, civil partner or cohabitant of a child's legal

parent to obtain full parental rights and responsibilities in respect of the child through step-parent adoption. Issues relating to adoption are the responsibility of the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration.

In relation to children born through surrogacy, the Deputy may be aware that the Government approved the drafting of a bill on AHR and associated areas of research which encompasses the regulation of a range of practices for the first time, including altruistic domestic surrogacy. The General Scheme of the Assisted Human Reproduction Bill also provides for the establishment of an independent regulatory authority for AHR. These provisions outline the specific conditions under which surrogacy in Ireland will be permitted, including a requirement for all surrogacy agreements to be pre-authorised by the AHR Regulatory Authority. The General Scheme also sets out a court-based mechanism through which the parentage of a child born through surrogacy may be transferred from the surrogate (and her husband, if applicable) to the intending parent(s). Drafting of the Bill is ongoing in conjunction with the Office of the Attorney General.

Disability Services Provision

971. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the measures he will introduce to open up full day care services for children and adults with disabilities. [14690/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 9 July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

The guidance document seeks to support the safe return of services in the context of ongoing public health guidance. It also recognises that the impact of public health guidance will result in services being provided at a reduced level and will require changes in how people are supported, increased use of technology where appropriate and more use of outreach supports.

Day services will gradually resume during the month of August. Service providers are already working to get day services ready to reopen safely, and in line with public health guidance. Service providers will be in touch with all families and service users during the month of July to discuss when they may expect the resumption of their service and what that service will consist of.

I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that this will be the first step towards returning to some sense of normalcy.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is

available on the New Directions website: www.hse.ie/newdirections. The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, the latest leaflet “Adult Disability Day Services and COVID-19 - What’s Happening? July 2020” is available at the above link.

Regarding services more widely, including children’s services, the HSE and its partner service providers are endeavouring to maintain essential support services during this unprecedented public health emergency. HSE Community Healthcare Organisations (CHOs) are continuing to proactively engage with disability service providers to ensure that appropriate contingency arrangements are made so that the necessary supports are put in place for persons with disabilities and their families. In the absence of regular access to some service and supports, CHOs and service providers tried to maintain services that can be delivered safely; providing outreach and telecare solutions, using technology where possible; and using creative and innovative models of care to support service users, both adults and children.

The HSE is very aware of the impact of the pandemic on people with disabilities, their families and carers and have over the past few weeks developed a number of working groups to plan and develop guidance on how we will be able to deliver supports, albeit in a new way and under the Public Health guidance.

In this regard and whilst accepting that very significant levels of vital therapies have been temporarily curtailed, it is important to emphasise that the HSE is now in the process of detailed planning in order to recover these services in line with the Governments’ Roadmap. It is important to note that this must be supported by way of assurance and oversight from the HSE’s Chief Clinical Officer along with the National Public Health Emergency Team, so that we can do so in a safe manner. This means that therapies, whilst being delivered in new ways, will gradually be re-introduced to children with disabilities.

With regard to specific services, service providers can provide this information directly. 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.

Ministerial Responsibilities

972. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if he has responsibility for the Health Research Board. [14743/20]

973. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the Minister with responsibility for the Health Research Board. [14744/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 972 and 973 together.

I can confirm that, as Minister for Health, I have oversight and responsibility for the Health Research Board. The HRB was established under the Health Research Board (Establishment) Order 1986 and the functions of the Board are as follows:

- (a) To promote, assist, commission or conduct health research to improve health and increase the effectiveness of the health services;
- (b) To maintain, develop, or support health information systems for the purposes of research and to provide the evidence for health policy and services;

(c) To liaise and co-operate with other research bodies in the State and outside the State in the promotion, commissioning or conduct of relevant research;

(d) To liaise with other health information bodies in the State and, where appropriate, outside the State in the development and support of health information systems;

In addition, the Health Research Board hosts the Health Research Consent Declaration Committee and associated Secretariat, and the recently established Office for National Research Ethic Committees. Furthermore, it acts as the national contact point for health in the EU Commission programmes including Horizon 2020, the EU4Health Programme and the Marie Curie programme. Finally, it supports evidence-informed decision making in my Department through the work of the Evidence Centre.

My officials are currently engaging closely with the HRB as they are in the process of developing their next Strategy from 2021. I look forward to the important role the HRB continues to play in supporting the transformation of our healthcare system through Sláintecare, in fostering a culture of research and innovation in our health services and with academic partners, in building capacity and research networks in critical areas and in supporting the Government's achievement of wider societal and economic goals.

Covid-19 Pandemic

974. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if holidaymakers from abroad are to spend 14 days in self-isolation on arrival; if there are legal repercussions arising from a breach of this 14-day period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14842/20]

1005. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the guidelines for travel within the common travel area; if quarantining is to be enforced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14685/20]

1107. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the restrictions and quarantine arrangements that will apply to persons coming here from the United States of America for the coming months in view of the high incidence of Covid-19 there at present; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15180/20]

1246. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health the measures being taken to help ensure that passengers entering Ireland from abroad do not contribute to the spread of Covid-19; his views on whether the measures are effective; if the measures are kept under constant review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15632/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 974, 1005, 1107 and 1246 together.

At present, the government advises against non-essential travel overseas.

Passengers arriving to Ireland from overseas are legally required to complete a COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form. The information provided on the form may be used to assist with contact tracing in the event that there is a suspected or confirmed case on board a flight or ferry.

Passengers arriving to Ireland are advised in the interest of public health to restrict their movements for 14 days.

Close consideration is being given by Government to policy in relation to overseas travel, including to additional measures being put in place at airports and ports to strengthen existing

arrangements.

Health Services Funding

975. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health his plans to ensure better funding of section 38 and 39 organisations. [14910/20]

1052. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health his immediate plans to properly fund section 38 and 39 organisations that provide vital health and disability services; and if extra funding will be provided to them in 2020 [14883/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 975 and 1052 together.

Funding is provided to the HSE for Health services in accordance with the letter of determination which sets out the approved level of overall HSE expenditure for the year in question.

Voluntary organisations which provide health and social care services are funded by the Health Service Executive under arrangements governed by Section 38 or Section 39 of the Health Act, 2004.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Government has agreed to allocate substantial additional funding to the Health Vote to meet the costs associated with the implementation of the measures outlined in the National Action Plan in response to COVID-19.

The HSE, through the Community Healthcare Organisations (CHOs) is actively engaging with any Section 38 and Section 39 providers who are experiencing financial challenges, including access to cash acceleration, where appropriate, to maintain continuity of service provision where cash flow issues arise. Organisations receiving funding from the HSE should raise any concerns in relation to financial issues that may have implications for continuity of service provision with the relevant Community Health Care Organisation (CHO) responsible for the service arrangements.

A critical focus at this time is the assurance of value for money in delivering on the required patient services and population health needs to effectively manage COVID-19 infection within the Irish context. Accordingly, the financial implications of measures taken to mitigate impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak are matters which the Department of Health will continue to keep under review in conjunction with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, as the situation evolves.

Organisations providing health and social care services were eligible to apply for the Community and Voluntary Sector €35m Stability Fund, which is now closed to applications. This scheme is intended to be a targeted once-off cash injection for organisations and groups delivering front-line services to the most at need in our society and in danger of imminent closure due to lost fundraising or traded income as a direct result of restrictions to counter the spread of COVID-19. The approval of funding under Tranche One of the Scheme was announced on 26 June. Further tranches will be announced over the coming weeks.

Covid-19 Pandemic

976. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if he will relax the 100-person restriction for indoor venues in the case of exhibitions in which very large venues are used in

view of the importance of the exhibitions and trade fair sector to the economy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14938/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy is aware, on 19 June 2020, the Taoiseach, on behalf of the Government, announced the restrictions that would be eased and the measures that will be in place in Phase 3 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business. On Thursday 25th June the Government confirmed the move to Phase 3 of the Roadmap from Monday, 29 June 2020. Information and advice about the restrictions that have been eased as part of Phase 3 and the measures that are now in place are available on the Government website at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d06271-easing-the-covid-19-restrictions-on-29-june-phase-3/>

The Government also agreed to bring forward actions in the remaining phases of the Roadmap and plan for four phases rather than the five originally indicated. This will be subject to continued progressive improvements in the health indicators identified in the Framework for Future Decision-Making described in the Roadmap.

Currently, gatherings of 50 people (indoor) and 100 people (outdoor) are permissible in line with the public health guidance on mass gatherings, which is also available on the Government website at <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/77452/39d51b02-5633-4e2f-a070-4551a3521081.pdf#page=6>. The limits will increase to 100 (indoors) and 500 (outdoors) in phase 4. This will be subject to continued progressive improvements in the health indicators identified in the Framework for Future Decision-Making described in the Roadmap.

The Government is very conscious of the impacts of COVID-19 on all sectors of the economy including the sector referred to by the Deputy. The Government established a Cabinet Committee (chaired by the Taoiseach), to assess the social and economic impacts of the potential spread of COVID-19. The work of the Cabinet Committee includes advice on downstream impacts, mitigations and contingencies for cross-sectoral issues and builds on the effective public health work undertaken to date. The cross-government approach to the coronavirus response is based around cohesive decision-making, partnership, expert public health advice and clarity of communications. The measures in place and the guidance and advice to various sectors, including the matters referred to by the Deputy are kept under constant review.

Disabilities Assessments

977. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether current timelines for assessment of needs and implementation of services are adequate. [15063/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): The recently published Programme for Government document “Our Shared Future” recognises the need to improve services for both children and adults with disabilities through better implementation and by working together across Government in a better way.

Policy initiatives, currently being implemented by the HSE, in Children’s Disability Services will, I am confident, improve the Assessment of Need process and reduce waiting times.

These initiatives include;

- The introduction, since January of this year, of a revised Standard Operating Procedure for Assessments of Need to ensure that there is a standardised approach to assessments across all areas. The purpose of this is to ensure children with disabilities and their families, access appropriate assessments and intervention therapy services as quickly as possible.

- The on-going reconfiguration, by the HSE, of its existing therapy resources for children with disabilities into multi-disciplinary geographically based teams, as part of its National Programme on Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People. This Programme aims to achieve a national equitable approach in service provision for all children based on their individual need and regardless of their disability, where they live or where they go to school.

Evidence to date from areas where this has been rolled out shows that implementation of this programme will also have a positive impact on waiting lists both for Assessments of Need and therapy provision.

In addition, the HSE's 2019 National Service Plan provided for 100 additional therapy posts for children's disability services. The addition of this level of support is intended to help the Assessment of Needs process and enable more therapy interventions for children. All 100 posts are in place.

Covid-19 Pandemic

978. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if he will review regulations relating to wedding venues to explore if increased guest numbers can be accommodated safely in larger venues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15285/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy is aware, on 19 June 2020, the then Taoiseach, on behalf of the Government, announced the restrictions that would be eased and the measures that will be in place in Phase 3 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business. On Thursday 25th June the Government confirmed the move to Phase 3 of the Roadmap from Monday, 29 June 2020. Information and advice about the restrictions that have been eased as part of Phase 3 and the measures that are now in place are available on the Government website at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d06271-easing-the-covid-19-restrictions-on-29-june-phase-3/>.

Gatherings of 50 people (indoor) and 100 people (outdoor) are permissible in line with the public health guidance on mass gatherings, which is also available on the Government website at <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/77452/39d51b02-5633-4e2f-a070-4551a3521081.pdf#page=6>. The limits will increase to 100 (indoors) and 500 (outdoors) in phase 4. This will be subject to continued progressive improvements in the health indicators identified in the Framework for Future Decision-Making described in the Roadmap.

As the Deputy will be aware, religious buildings and places of worship may also now be reopened, in line with public health guidelines. The Government has exempted places of worship from the regulations restricting numbers on mass gatherings. The exemption applies to places of worship only and not to any gatherings that may take place after the religious ceremony such as wedding receptions.

Detailed Covid-19 Guidance has been developed for religious services. The Cabinet Committee reviewed the guidance, which state that an assessment should be carried out for each premises to determine how many can attend within the requirements of social distancing.

The Cabinet Committee decided that where the size of the premises allows for a capacity of greater than 50 this may be permitted only where:

- Social distancing guidelines are adhered to
- The premises can be subdivided into distinct sections (cordoned or marked appropriately)

of not more than 50 persons in each section

- There is a minimum of 4m between sections
- Each section has its own entrance/exit route
- There are separate arrangements for elements of the service involving close contact, e.g. the distribution of Holy Communion
- Strictly no movement of people between sections before, during or after the service
- The premises is well-ventilated.

Account must also be taken regarding the risk of congregation by people outside before and after any services, having regard to outdoor overall limits on mass gatherings and arrangements for staggered exiting after ceremonies

The use of face coverings is strongly recommended for such indoor settings.

Disability Services Provision

979. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Health if a plan will be developed to address the situation in which young disabled persons are being housed in residential care homes against their will by resourcing them to relocate to suitable accommodation with the necessary personal support services, enabling them to live with dignity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15363/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): 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.

Disability Services Funding

980. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if disability funding being administered by the HSE will be reassigned to the new Department of children and disability for distribution in view of the reassignment of the disability portfolio from his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15671/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Department of Health is engaging closely with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs about the legal transfer of functions to the new Department of Children, Disability, Equality and Integration in line with the "Transfer of Functions Guidelines and Best Practice Handbook" produced by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. As part of that engagement, a member of the Department's Management Board has been assigned to lead a working group to manage discussions with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs on the relevant functions, budgets, staffing, records,

assets and other relevant matters as encompassed by the legal Transfer of Functions. It is anticipated that the disability services currently funded by the Vote of the Department of Health and administered by the HSE will form part of that discussion.

Disability Services Provision

981. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health when a service (details supplied) will recommence day services and respite care; his views on the fact that no dates have been provided to users to date in relation to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15673/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 9 July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

The guidance document seeks to support the safe return of services in the context of ongoing public health guidance. It also recognises that the impact of public health guidance will result in services being provided at a reduced level and will require changes in how people are supported, increased use of technology where appropriate and more use of outreach supports.

Day services will gradually resume during the month of August. Service providers are already working to get day services ready to reopen safely, and in line with public health guidance. Service providers will be in touch with all families and service users during the month of July to discuss when they may expect the resumption of their service and what that service will consist of.

I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that this will be the first step towards returning to some sense of normalcy.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: www.hse.ie/newdirections. The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, the latest leaflet “Adult Disability Day Services and COVID-19 - What’s Happening? July 2020” is available at the above link.

Regarding respite services, over the past number of months services were either suspended or delivered in alternative ways following Public Health guidance. One of the primary reasons for the suspension of services in a number of areas was the reconfiguration of respite houses for the purposes of isolation units. As the threat of COVID-19 remains, service providers must evaluate and risk assess the need for the maintenance of minimal isolation units while also re-

instating respite service provision.

Processes are underway in order to plan for the reintroduction of respite services for people with a disability and their families, with local CHOs and service providers working together at a regional level in order to plan and co-ordinate efforts. The HSE has now developed a number of guidelines which should be considered by service providers in their provision of respite services for people with a disability.

With regard to specific service locations, service providers can provide this information directly. 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

982. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health when guidelines will be finalised and issued for the reopening of day services for adults with intellectual disabilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15674/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 9 July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

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I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that this will be the first step towards returning to some sense of normalcy.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: www.hse.ie/newdirections. The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, the latest leaflet "Adult Disability Day Services and COVID-19 - What's Happening? July 2020" is available at the

above link.

Covid-19 Pandemic

983. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health when guidelines will be finalised and issued for respite services for adults with intellectual disabilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15675/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): 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.

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

984. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health if Covid-19 guidelines regarding wedding guests will be reconsidered; if the number of guests permitted will be changed from 90 to 160 in cases in which square metre space is ample and available and social distancing can be adhered to (details supplied). [15680/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy is aware, on 19 June 2020, the then Taoiseach, on behalf of the Government, announced the restrictions that would be eased and the measures that will be in place in Phase 3 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business. On Thursday 25th June the Government confirmed the move to Phase 3 of the Roadmap from Monday, 29 June 2020. Information and advice about the restrictions that have been eased as part of Phase 3 and the measures that are now in place are available on the Government website at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d06271-easing-the-covid-19-restrictions-on-29-june-phase-3/>.

Gatherings of 50 people (indoor) and 100 people (outdoor) are permissible in line with the public health guidance on mass gatherings, which is also available on the Government website at <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/77452/39d51b02-5633-4e2f-a070-4551a3521081.pdf#page=6>. The limits will increase to 100 (indoors) and 500 (outdoors) in phase 4. This will be subject to continued progressive improvements in the health indicators identified in the Framework for Future Decision-Making described in the Roadmap.

As the Deputy will be aware, religious buildings and places of worship may also now be reopened, in line with public health guidelines. The Government has exempted places of worship from the regulations restricting numbers on mass gatherings. The exemption applies to places of worship only and not to any gatherings that may take place after the religious ceremony such as wedding receptions.

Detailed Covid-19 Guidance has been developed for religious services. The Cabinet Committee reviewed the guidance, which state that an assessment should be carried out for each premises to determine how many can attend within the requirements of social distancing.

The Cabinet Committee decided that where the size of the premises allows for a capacity of greater than 50 this may be permitted only where:

- Social distancing guidelines are adhered to
- The premises can be subdivided into distinct sections (cordoned or marked appropriately) of not more than 50 persons in each section
- There is a minimum of 4m between sections
- Each section has its own entrance/exit route
- There are separate arrangements for elements of the service involving close contact, e.g. the distribution of Holy Communion
- Strictly no movement of people between sections before, during or after the service
- The premises is well-ventilated.

Account must also be taken regarding the risk of congregation by people outside before and after any services, having regard to outdoor overall limits on mass gatherings and arrangements for staggered exiting after ceremonies

The use of face coverings is strongly recommended for such indoor settings.

Health Information and Quality Authority

985. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the number of HIQA inspectors that have received training in infection control per region; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15705/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) was established in 2007 as an independent authority to drive high-quality and safe care for health and social care services in Ireland.

HIQA's mandate extends across a range of public, private and voluntary sector services. Reporting to the Minister for Health and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, HIQA's role is to develop standards, inspect and review health and social care services and support informed decisions on how services are delivered.

HIQA operates under the Health Act 2007, which sets out the functions which the Authority is to carry out. HIQA has responsibility for setting standards for healthcare services, and monitoring compliance with those standards. It also regulates facilities providing care for the elderly and those with disabilities, and has a role with regard to inspecting some of the social care services which are accessed by children to determine if they are meeting the relevant National Standards.

Following a statutory consultation process and Ministerial approval, HIQA published specific national standards for community health and social care services in Ireland (including nursing and residential homes), which cover infection prevention and control and antimicrobial stewardship. HIQA has also developed standards for other services, including national standards for the prevention and control of healthcare-associated infections in acute healthcare services. HIQA has in turn conducted a thematic inspection programme against these standards since 2012.

HIQA has advised the Department all of its social care inspectors (i.e. for older persons' and disability services) have a professional health and or social care qualification and experience

relevant to the role. All of its 59 social care inspectors have had full training as a regulator, and are confident in assessing the quality of care in a designated centre which includes monitoring compliance with national standards and regulations related to infection prevention and control.

HIQA's further advises that its 15 healthcare inspectors also have professional healthcare qualifications and training in monitoring compliance with national standards related to infection prevention and control.

In the context of this public health emergency, HIQA's advises that its full cohort of inspectors have had enhanced training in assessing how well registered providers have planned for, can detect, respond to and manage an outbreak of COVID-19. In addition, training has been delivered to inspectors of social services on the public health measures required to undertake inspections.

Health Information and Quality Authority

986. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health if it is mandatory for HIQA inspections of nursing homes to include infection inspections; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15706/20]

988. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the average time for which HIQA inspection teams remain on site during nursing home inspections; if there is a maximum time limit ascribed to inspection teams in these instances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15708/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I propose to take Questions Nos. 986 and 988 together.

Since 2009 the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, has been the statutory independent regulator in place for the nursing home sector, whether a HSE managed or a private nursing home. The Authority, established under the Health Act 2007, has significant and wide-ranging powers up to and including withdrawing the registration of a nursing home facility, which means that it can no longer operate as a service provider. This responsibility is underpinned by a comprehensive quality framework comprising of Registration Regulations, Care and Welfare Regulations and National Quality Standards.

HIQA monitors compliance with nationally-mandated standards and regulations to ensure that older people are receiving safe, high-quality and person-centred care. HIQA takes a risk-based approach to inspection and when information is received to suggest that there is a risk to the wellbeing of residents, HIQA uses this information to decide which regulations will be inspected against. Registered providers are required to be compliant with regulation 27 of the Health Act 2007 (Care and Welfare of Residents in Designated Centres for Older People) Regulations 2013 on infection control.

HIQA inspections can take place over one or two days, with the duration influenced by factors such as the:

- COVID-19 status of the centre
- reason for the inspection
- number of inspectors on inspection
- size of the centre

- findings during the course of the inspection.

Inspections progress rapidly in centres where residents are well cared for, the findings are good, and the provider is organised and the required documentation is readily available for review.

Protected Disclosures

987. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the number of protected disclosures made by HIQA employees in each year since 2015 and to date 2020; the number of those staff that made protected disclosures that are working on a full-time basis with HIQA; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15707/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): No protected disclosures were made to me by employees of HIQA during the period referred to by the Deputy.

Question No. 988 answered with Question No. 986.

Covid-19 Pandemic

989. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Health when adult day care services will resume; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15773/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 9 July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

The guidance document seeks to support the safe return of services in the context of ongoing public health guidance. It also recognises that the impact of public health guidance will result in services being provided at a reduced level and will require changes in how people are supported, increased use of technology where appropriate and more use of outreach supports.

Day services will gradually resume during the month of August. Service providers are already working to get day services ready to reopen safely, and in line with public health guidance. Service providers will be in touch with all families and service users during the month of July to discuss when they may expect the resumption of their service and what that service will consist of.

I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that this will be the first step towards returning to some sense

of normalcy.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: www.hse.ie/newdirections. The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, the latest leaflet “Adult Disability Day Services and COVID-19 - What’s Happening? July 2020” is available at the above link.

Covid-19 Pandemic

990. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health the status of the planned national guidelines governing the reopening of services for persons with disabilities in either day and respite settings during the Covid-19 pandemic; when they will be published and implemented; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16090/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 9 July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

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I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that this will be the first step towards returning to some sense of normalcy.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: www.hse.ie/newdirections. The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, the latest leaflet “Adult Disability Day Services and COVID-19 - What’s Happening? July 2020” is available at the above link.

Disability Services Provision

991. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health when it is envisaged a facility (details supplied) will be allowed resume services for its customers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16091/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 9 July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

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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.

Disability Services Provision

992. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health when a service (details supplied) will be allowed to resume services for its customers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16092/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As part of the

overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 9 July 2020.

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The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: www.hse.ie/newdirections. The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, the latest leaflet “Adult Disability Day Services and COVID-19 - What’s Happening? July 2020” is available at the above link.

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.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

993. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health when normal services for adolescent mental health and other similar services will resume; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16093/20]

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

Health Services Provision

994. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health when normal services for de-

velopment checks for infants and children will resume; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16094/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply.

Hospital Appointments Status

995. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Clare will receive an urgent appointment for surgery at Temple Street Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16116/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to pause most elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and in accordance with World Health Organisation guidelines, and the National Action Plan.

To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, the HSE launched its Strategic Framework for 'Service Continuity in a Covid Environment' on 24th June 2020. Its implementation will ensure service resumption is done in an integrated way. This will involve a phased approach to ensure community services are strengthened. The Framework will also consolidate new ways of working and build on international knowledge. The HSE is currently developing a Service Continuity Roadmap for the resumption of services across the health system. My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working together to evaluate the impact of Covid 19 on Scheduled Care waiting lists, in order to be prepared to address pent up demand.

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 is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 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.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to investigate the matter and provide you with a direct response.

Home Help Service

996. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health the home help waiting lists in the various community health organisations by CHO area. [14657/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is an operational matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

National Children's Hospital

997. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the status of works at the national children's hospital; the timeline for the completion of the works; the estimated total cost of the project; the impact Covid-19 has had on the project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14659/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The NPHDB has statutory responsibility for planning, designing, building and equipping the new children's hospital and I have referred your question to the NPHDB for direct reply.

Covid-19 Pandemic

998. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the capital infrastructure projects that have had works carried out in response to Covid-19 in County Tipperary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14661/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

Bereavement Care

999. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if he will investigate and address the unacceptable miscommunication that has taken place between HIQA and his Department in regard to the availability of a bereavement service for persons who have lost loved ones in a nursing home, such as a person (details supplied); his plans to ensure that his officials respond directly to the person in respect of this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14663/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As Minister I cannot comment in relation to the details of an individual case. However, I understand that HIQA communicated directly with affected family members on 30th June to clarify matters and apologise for any confusion caused by the miscommunication.

I have further been advised that the Patient Advocacy Service (PAS) is currently involved in early discussions with the nursing home involved to establish if it is possible to extend its remit to provide patient advocacy support to residents and families affected.

I would like to acknowledge that these are very sad and challenging times for anybody who has suffered the loss of a loved one, and should anyone wish to receive bereavement support, the Hospice Bereavement Support Line is 1800 80 70 77 and is currently open from 10am to 1pm Monday to Friday.

Disability Support Services

1000. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health the additional supports that are available to children who have a dual diagnosis of autism and verbal dyspraxia; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14671/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): 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.

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.

Disability Services Provision

1001. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a resumption of services is planned at a HSE adult disability day service centre (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14675/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations have been closed since March. However priority service users have been identified in each CHO, and individualised supports continue to be provided to many people in alternative models particularly for these individuals with higher support needs, through alternative means such as via online support and/or regular telephone contact with families. Health and social care responses to the current public health emergency are under continuing review, including specific measures such as these to support vulnerable people.

The resumption of adult day services is currently being considered by my Department and the HSE as part of broader planning to prepare for the resumption of non-COVID-19 community and social care services in the current environment, and in line with public health guidance. My Department and the HSE has established a Joint Working Group to develop a plan for Community Capacity.

The HSE is finalising plans to re-establish vital non-COVID supports and services. This includes very careful and detailed work on the part of the disability sector with national guidance and will result in directing how all funded agencies can deliver services on a medium to long-term basis. A national group for the resumption of day services representative of service users and families, service providers and the HSE is working together to prepare for the resumption of day service supports in line with COVID-19 guidance. The Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services and Action Plan for resumption of services have been completed. The national group are currently developing guidance to support the day service sector to reopen within the parameters of public health advice.

Community Healthcare Organisations are working with service providers to ascertain the current level of service provision and innovative practises that have developed over the last number of months. The collation and analysis of this data will provide a current national picture which will enable the resumption group to address the challenges of reopening day service locations.

The resumption group plan to have completed the above strands of work shortly, following which a timeframe for the phased reopening of adult day services will be planned in cooperation with HSE disability services and service providers. In the meantime, service providers continue to contact day service users regarding their support needs and are providing those supports in different ways. Some supports continue to be provided in a number of ways, for example by telephone, online communication and responses to address emergency needs.

The HSE and disability service providers, where identified, will continue to communicate with school leavers and their families to plan and organise for a transition to day services in line with public health guidance.

The safety of service users and staff is of critical importance therefore the attendance at locations will be determined by public health guidance, which may result in some reduction of capacity.

An information leaflet for service users and their families was developed by the national group and distributed widely to all stakeholders on June 9th.

It is expected that a clearer picture will emerge shortly as to when day services are likely to be reinstated and how the service will be delivered taking account of Public Health Guidance and COVID-19 restrictions.

The Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services and the information leaflet “What’s Happening” is available on the New Directions website: www.hse.ie/newdirections.

As the Deputy’s question refers to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Appointments Status

1002. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of an appointment in Cork University Hospital for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14679/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to pause most elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) and in accordance with World Health Organisation guidelines, and the National Action Plan.

To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically aligned and prioritised way, the HSE launched its Strategic Framework for ‘Service Continuity in a Covid Environment’ on 24th June 2020. Its implementation will ensure service resumption is done in an integrated way. This will involve a phased approach to ensure community services are strengthened. The Framework will also consolidate new ways of working and build on international knowledge. The HSE is currently developing a Service Continuity Roadmap for the resumption of services across the health system. My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working together to evaluate the impact of Covid 19 on Scheduled Care waiting lists, in order to be prepared to address pent up demand.

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 is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 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.

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

Disability Services Provision

1003. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health if a matter raised in correspondence by a group (details supplied) in respect of adult day services will be examined. [14681/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations have been closed since March. However priority service users have been identified in each CHO, and individualised supports continue to be provided to many people in alternative models particularly for these individuals with higher support needs, through alternative means such as via online support and/or regular telephone contact with families. Health and social care responses to the current public health emergency are under continuing review, including specific measures such as these to support vulnerable people.

The resumption of adult day services is currently being considered by my Department and the HSE as part of broader planning to prepare for the resumption of non-COVID-19 community and social care services in the current environment, and in line with public health guidance. My Department and the HSE has established a Joint Working Group to develop a plan for Community Capacity.

The HSE is finalising plans to re-establish vital non-COVID supports and services. This includes very careful and detailed work on the part of the disability sector with national guidance and will result in directing how all funded agencies can deliver services on a medium to long-term basis. A national group for the resumption of day services representative of service users and families, service providers and the HSE is working together to prepare for the resumption of day service supports in line with COVID-19 guidance. The Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services and Action Plan for resumption of services have been completed. The national group are currently developing guidance to support the day service sector to reopen within the parameters of public health advice.

Community Healthcare Organisations are working with service providers to ascertain the current level of service provision and innovative practises that have developed over the last number of months. The collation and analysis of this data will provide a current national picture which will enable the resumption group to address the challenges of reopening day service locations.

The resumption group plan to have completed the above strands of work soon, following which a timeframe for the phased reopening of adult day services will be planned in cooperation with HSE disability services and service providers. In the meantime, service providers continue to contact day service users regarding their support needs and are providing those supports in different ways. Some supports continue to be provided in a number of ways, for example by telephone, online communication and responses to address emergency needs.

The HSE and disability service providers, where identified, will continue to communicate with school leavers and their families to plan and organise for a transition to day services in line with public health guidance.

The safety of service users and staff is of critical importance therefore the attendance at

locations will be determined by public health guidance, which may result in some reduction of capacity.

An information leaflet for service users and their families was developed by the national group and distributed widely to all stakeholders on June 9th.

It is expected that a clearer picture will emerge shortly as to when day services are likely to be reinstated and how the service will be delivered taking account of Public Health Guidance and COVID-19 restrictions.

The Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services and the information leaflet “What’s Happening” is available on the New Directions website: www.hse.ie/newdirections.

Covid-19 Tests

1004. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health his plans to provide Covid-19 testing to persons returning from international travel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14684/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Close consideration is being given by Government to policy in relation to overseas travel, including to additional measures being put in place at airports and ports to strengthen our existing arrangements. Officials from my Department and from the HSE are working closely with counterparts in other Government departments in this regard.

The intention is that Government will make an announcement on further measures in this policy area in the coming days.

Question No. 1005 answered with Question No. 974.

Hospital Procedures

1006. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the reason there is a difference in policy on allowing the attendance of partners of women giving birth in Cork University Maternity Hospital as compared to the Rotunda and Holles Street hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14688/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service issue, I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply to you directly.

Hospital Procedures

1007. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE will be instructed to allow in birthing partners of women giving birth in Cork University Maternity Hospital, with associated mask protection and temperature checks. [14689/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service issue, I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply to you directly.

Hospital Appointments Status

1008. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a hospital appointment of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14702/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to pause most elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) and in accordance with World Health Organisation guidelines, and the National Action Plan.

To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically aligned and prioritised way, the HSE launched its Strategic Framework for ‘Service Continuity in a Covid Environment’ on 24th June 2020. Its implementation will ensure service resumption is done in an integrated way. This will involve a phased approach to ensure community services are strengthened. The Framework will also consolidate new ways of working and build on international knowledge. The HSE is currently developing a Service Continuity Roadmap for the resumption of services across the health system. My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working together to evaluate the impact of Covid 19 on Scheduled Care waiting lists, in order to be prepared to address pent up demand.

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 is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 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.

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

Hospital Appointments Status

1009. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a Cork University Hospital appointment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14703/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to pause most elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) and in accordance with World Health Organisation guidelines, and the National Action Plan.

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The HSE is currently developing a Service Continuity Roadmap for the resumption of services across the health system. My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working together to evaluate the impact of Covid 19 on Scheduled Care waiting lists, in order to be prepared to address pent up demand.

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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 Home Inspections

1010. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Health the number of nursing homes closed from January 2020 to date pursuant to section 64 of the Health Act 2007, by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14706/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Section 64 of the Health Act 2007 (as amended) requires the HSE to make alternative arrangements for residents in a nursing home where the registration has been cancelled under section 59. To date in 2020, one nursing home (located in Wicklow) has closed under section 59.

Medicinal Products

1011. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he will address the inequality that is being created by denying patients diagnosed with stage 3 melanoma in the public system to access refunds for adjuvant immunotherapy, nivolumab and pembrolizumab, and targeted therapy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14711/20]

1220. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health when funding will be provided for a cancer treatment (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15560/20]

1222. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if he will fund adjuvant immunotherapy, such as nivolumab and pembrolizumab, with respect to stage 3 melanoma in the public health system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15565/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1011, 1220 and 1222 together.

The HSE has statutory responsibility for medicine pricing and reimbursement decisions, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013. The Act specifies the criteria for decisions on the reimbursement of medicines.

In line with the 2013 Act and the national framework agreed with industry, a company must submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the reimbursement list.

Reimbursement is for licensed indications which have been granted market authorisation by the European Medicines Agency or the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are made on objective, scientific and economic grounds, on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics (NCPE).

The NCPE conducts health technology assessments (HTAs) for the HSE and makes recommendations on reimbursement to assist HSE decisions. The NCPE uses a decision framework to systematically assess whether a drug is cost-effective as a health intervention.

The HSE at all times ensures that the systems that it has in place are designed to provide equitable access to all medicines across all therapeutic areas, cancer and non-cancer, from the resources provided to it.

In 2019 and 2020, the Vhi decided to extend cover to a number of new cancer medicines. The decision by the Vhi applies only to private care to private Vhi patients in private hospitals. It has no impact on the availability and use of medicines in public hospitals, where there is no distinction between public and private patients.

A number of the medicines, or indications (which includes pembrolizumab and nivolumab), which the Vhi has now decided to cover, are in process with the HSE with a view to making them available in the public hospital system.

I am advised by the HSE that it has received pricing and reimbursement applications for the indications listed below:

- Nivolumab (Opdivo®) as monotherapy is indicated for the adjuvant treatment of adults with melanoma with involvement of lymph nodes or metastatic disease who have undergone complete resection.

- Pembrolizumab (Keytruda®) as monotherapy is indicated for the adjuvant treatment of adults with Stage III melanoma and lymph node involvement who have undergone complete resection.

The HSE has confirmed that health technology assessments have been completed by the NCPE for both these indications. These applications for reimbursement are now being assessed by the HSE in line with the 2013 Health Act.

Special Educational Needs

1012. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE has a legal duty to refer children to the National Council for Special Education or a special educational needs officer in circumstances in which there may be an educational need at present or in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14721/20]

1013. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE has a requirement and/or an obligation, or a legal duty, to properly set out in service statements full details of all services available to meet the needs of a child in terms of timelines in which to deliver assessments of needs reports and other issues; if there is an obligation on the HSE to have an appropriate complaints mechanism to deal with issues parents might have arising out of these reports; and

if he will make a statement on the matter. [14722/20]

1014. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE has a requirement or legal duty to refer a child to the National Council for Special Education and-or the special needs officer for future educational needs and services and the timeline for services for therapy and health needs; if the HSE has a requirement to provide details of services that are available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14723/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1012 to 1014, inclusive, together.

The Government is committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities which will empower them to live independent lives, provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose, and enhance their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives

As the Deputy's question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Appointments Status

1015. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if an appropriate appointment and treatment will be expedited for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14731/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to pause most elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and in accordance with World Health Organisation guidelines, and the National Action Plan.

To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically aligned and prioritised way, the HSE launched its Strategic Framework for 'Service Continuity in a Covid Environment' on 24th June 2020. Its implementation will ensure service resumption is done in an integrated way. This will involve a phased approach to ensure community services are strengthened. The Framework will also consolidate new ways of working and build on international knowledge. The HSE is currently developing a Service Continuity Roadmap for the resumption of services across the health system. My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working together to evaluate the impact of Covid 19 on Scheduled Care waiting lists, in order to be prepared to address pent up demand.

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 is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 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.

14 July 2020

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

Health Services Staff

1016. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health the number of nurses' positions that have been vacant in the Children's Health Ireland hospital group as of 26 June 2020, in tabular form. [14757/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Primary Care Services

1017. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in CHO 7 who were waiting for an ophthalmology appointment in primary care at the end of June 2020; and the numbers waiting from zero to three, three to six, six to nine and more than nine months, respectively. [14758/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the HSE for attention of the Deputy and direct reply to the Deputy.

Medicinal Products

1018. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health when it is proposed to licence a drug (details supplied) here and make it available under the general medical scheme; the reason for the delay in the consideration of this matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14789/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drugs schemes, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

In line with the 2013 Act and the national framework agreed with industry, a company must submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the reimbursement list.

Reimbursement is for licensed indications which have been granted market authorisation by the European Medicines Agency or the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are made on objective, scientific and economic grounds, on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics (NCPE). The NCPE conducts health technology assessments (HTAs) for the HSE and makes recommendations on reimbursement to assist HSE decisions.

I am advised by the HSE that it has received pricing and reimbursement applications for the following indications for dupilumab (Dupixent®):

1. Treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adults who are candidates for systemic therapy;
2. Treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adolescents 12 years and older who

are candidates for systemic therapy.

1) The HSE received an application for pricing/reimbursement of dupilumab (Dupixent®) on 10 November 2017 from the applicant company for the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adult patients who are candidates for systemic therapy. The HSE commissioned the rapid review process on the 13 November 2017 and the NCPE advised the HSE on 24 November 2017 that a full Health Technology Assessment (HTA) was required for this medicine.

The HSE commissioned a full Health Technology Assessment on 29 November 2017 as per agreed processes. This assessment was completed in December 2019 with the NCPE recommending that dupilumab (Dupixent®) be considered for reimbursement if cost-effectiveness could be improved relative to existing treatments

2) The HSE received an application for pricing/reimbursement of dupilumab (Dupixent®) on 13 December 2019 for the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adolescents 12 years and older who are candidates for systemic therapy. The HSE commissioned the rapid review process on the 17 December 2019. Following receipt of a rapid review dossier, the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics (NCPE) advised the HSE on 17 January 2020 that a HTA was not recommended and that dupilumab (Dupixent®) not be considered for reimbursement at the submitted price.

The HSE Corporate Pharmaceutical Unit (CPU) engaged in commercial negotiations with the company in February 2020 regarding both the adult and adolescent populations

The HSE Drugs Group is the national committee which the HSE has in place to make recommendations on the pricing and reimbursement of medicines. The membership of the HSE Drugs Group includes public interest members. The final HTA report was reviewed by the HSE Drugs Group, along with the outputs of commercial negotiations, and the patient group submission received during the HTA process. The HSE Drugs Group considered all the evidence and made a recommendation to the HSE Executive Management Team not to support reimbursement of dupilumab (Dupixent®) for the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in both adults and adolescents 12 years and older who are candidates for systemic therapy.

The final decision making authority in the HSE is the HSE Executive Management Team. Dupilumab (Dupixent®) remains under consideration with the HSE Executive Management Team.

Medical Cards

1019. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter regarding general practitioners charging for regular blood tests (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14816/20]

1117. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the liability of medical card holders to pay for blood tests carried out by their general practitioner; the efforts made to ensure that medical card holders are not being charged for the routine service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15225/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1019 and 1117 together.

Persons who are eligible for GP care without charge under the Health Act 1970 are not

subject to any co-payments or other charges in respect of such services. There is no provision under the GMS GP contract for persons who hold a medical card or GP visit card to be charged for routine phlebotomy services provided by their GP which are required to either assist in the diagnosis of illness or the treatment of a condition and the HSE has advised GPs accordingly.

I am aware that, nonetheless, some GPs are charging GMS patients for phlebotomy services in some circumstances. The GP chronic disease management programme which is being phased in from this year will involve the ongoing monitoring of patients' condition and any blood tests required in this context will be covered by the fees payable for this care.

However, it remains a matter of concern to me that a GMS and GP visit card patient might be charged for blood tests which are clinically necessary and I have asked my officials to discuss with the HSE what further solutions to this issue may be possible. If a patient who holds a medical card or GP visit card believes he or she has been incorrectly charged for routine phlebotomy services by his or her GP, then that patient should report the matter to their HSE Local Health Office.

Medical Cards

1020. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health the number of applications for a refund of phlebotomy charges incorrectly incurred by medical card patients in counties Carlow and Kilkenny; and the number of these applications that were approved and refused, respectively. [14822/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

Hospital Appointments Status

1021. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the status of an appointment for a person (details supplied); if an appointment will be scheduled as soon as possible; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14823/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to pause most elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and in accordance with World Health Organisation guidelines, and the National Action Plan.

To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, the HSE launched its Strategic Framework for 'Service Continuity in a Covid Environment' on 24th June 2020. Its implementation will ensure service resumption is done in an integrated way. This will involve a phased approach to ensure community services are strengthened. The Framework will also consolidate new ways of working and build on international knowledge. The HSE is currently developing a Service Continuity Roadmap for the resumption of services across the health system. My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working together to evaluate the impact of Covid 19 on Scheduled Care waiting lists, in order to be prepared to address pent up demand.

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 is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 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.

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

Disabilities Data

1022. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Health the official figures for autism in an area (details supplied); and the breakdown by age of the figures. [14837/20]

1023. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Health the number of children with autism living in Dublin 2, 4, 6, 6W and 8. [14838/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1022 and 1023 together.

The Government is committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities which will empower them to live independent lives, provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose, and enhance their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives.

As the Deputy's question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

HSE Regional Service Plans

1024. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health the expected start date for development of a new elective hospital in Cork city; the possible locations of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14840/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As you will recall, the National Development Plan stated that, "New dedicated ambulatory elective only hospital facilities will be introduced in Dublin Galway and Cork. These facilities will provide high volume, low complexity procedures on a day and outpatient basis, together with a range of ambulatory diagnostic services. The high volume of demand for such services in these major urban centres is sufficient to justify the construction of dedicated ambulatory centres."

The elective hospitals oversight group has completed a Catchment Area Analysis within Dublin, Cork and Galway, within a national capacity context, but also within the catchments defined by the proposed Regional Health Areas, aimed at selected scopes of service.

The Elective Hospitals Oversight Group is currently developing a high-level facilities spatial brief and order of magnitude costs which details the elective clustering of appropriate ac-

tivities for each of the three facilities in Dublin, Cork and Galway. This will also include an output and facility specification, based on efficient and effective service delivery. This is due to be complete in the Autumn of 2020.

Dental Services

1025. **Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick** asked the Minister for Health his views on the fact that many dentists are refusing to see medical card holders and are only providing treatment to private patients, which is leaving the most financially vulnerable constituents without vital dental care; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14850/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I am concerned about reports that some medical card holders have been refused access to treatment by a small number of dentists who hold Dental Treatment Service Scheme (DTSS) contracts, following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions in May which enabled the return to routine care.

My Department has received reassurance from the HSE that any patients who have been refused care in a DTSS contracted service have been accommodated either in an alternative DTSS practice and/or directly by the HSE.

I would expect due process to be followed in respect of any withdrawal from the terms of a DTSS contract, in particular regarding an appropriate period of notice. I would also expect dentists to continue to honour their ethical and contractual obligations to patients during the notice withdrawal period, to either provide a service or to ensure that patients are referred to another dentist who will provide a service.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1026. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if the 50-person restriction for indoor gatherings refers to the whole building in the case of a gym regardless of its size; if the size of the area in the building can be taken into account; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14854/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Since 29 June, as part of Phase 3 of the Roadmap to Reopening Society and Business, gyms are permitted to open. Gym owners/operators are advised to consult the public health advice which can be found on the government website at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/cf9b0d-new-public-health-measures-effective-now-to-prevent-further-spread-o/#cultural-social-and-sport-measures>. The measures that are recommended include that those responsible for reopening these facilities carry out a risk assessment before reopening to manage the public health risk for their customers, attendees, participants, and staff. The assessment should consider the risk factors for getting COVID-19, that is Distance, Activity, Time and Environment, and include controls such as managed entry, improved hygiene facilities, and regular cleaning to limit these. Facilities that reopen should observe physical distancing guidelines and apply the public health checklist to their operation. Furthermore, facilities reopening with a return of staff should apply the Return to Work Safely Protocol (see <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/22829a-return-to-work-safely-protocol/>). This has been designed to support employers and workers to put measures in place that will prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace.

Regulation 5 of the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A – Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 3) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 234 of 2020) provides that a person shall not organise, or

cause to be organised, an indoor event (a gathering of persons) for cultural, entertainment, recreational, sporting, social, community or educational reasons other than where the maximum number of persons attending, or proposed to attend, the indoor event (for whatever reason) does not exceed 50 persons.

People separately planning to attend a gym would not constitute an “event” or “gathering.”

Covid-19 Pandemic

1027. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the authority responsible for the collection of public health passenger locator forms in view of the agreement with the Department of Justice and Equality on a temporary administrative basis to undertake same on behalf of the health authorities, an arrangement that ceased at the end of June 2020; the number of staff assigned to it; the way in which the handover was conducted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14855/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Department of Justice continues to collect COVID-19 passenger locator forms at points of entry into the State.

Hospital Equipment

1028. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if the national maternity hospital, Holles Street, has received a new scanning machine for mesh implants; and if staff have received training on the way to use it. [14858/20]

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

HSE Waiting Lists

1029. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if he will guarantee that no patient will have to wait more than six months for health treatments here; and if so, the date he expects to be able to deliver this. [14860/20]

1030. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the amount he plans to spend on the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, in 2020. [14861/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1029 and 1030 together.

Budget 2020 included an increase in funding for the National Treatment Purchase Fund. This saw the funding of the NTPF increase by €25million to €100million. The year-on-year increases to the National Treatment Purchase Fund since Budget 2017 reflect the Government's priority to improve waiting times for patients to access hospital treatment.

It was the expectation of the Department that the majority (€69million) of the NTPF funding allocation for 2020 would be expended broadly in line with 2019 levels of activity vis-à-vis IPDC, OPD and GI Endoscopy initiatives. In addition, in 2020, the NTPF would further expand its list of targeted inpatient and day case procedures to support further significant reductions in wait times, with a particular focus on improving access to hospital outpatient services.

This would include arranging full care for patients on the outpatient waiting lists, to include the surgery or treatment where required.

A key focus in 2020 was the development of sustainable solutions to tackle waiting lists, in line with the objectives of Sláintecare. In this regard, it was the intention that the additional €25million of the NTPF Budget allocation for 2020 would be used to examine new and innovative solutions.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to pause all non-urgent elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and in accordance with World Health Organisation guidelines, and the National Action Plan.

At the end of March, the NTPF advised the Department that in line with the National Action Plan on COVID-19, it was temporarily ceasing the commissioning of both Inpatient / Day case procedures (including GI scopes) and Outpatient appointments. This temporary cessation applied to both insourced and outsourced commissioning.

The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) has since revised its recommendation on the pausing of all non-essential health services, with a recommendation that the 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.

With the increase in elective care activity, the NTPF's Commissioning Team is now working with HSE Hospital Groups and Private Hospitals to establish available capacity for insourcing and outsourcing initiatives from July onwards. Due to the ongoing emergency, the available capacity of the health system, both private and public, is currently being reviewed and it is not yet possible to estimate how much activity will be available for procurement. The Department and the NTPF will engage with each other in order to assess the potential for the NTPF to use its full allocation to purchase additional hospital treatments. In doing so, the NTPF will consider the entire health system, outside of the traditional NTPF areas, including diagnostics and beds.

Health Services Provision

1031. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the number of extra hospital public beds he expects to deliver in each of the years 2020 to 2024. [14862/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, commits to continuing investment in our health care services in line with the recommendations of the Health Service Capacity Review and the commitments in Project Ireland 2040.

The Capacity Review found that the net requirement, in a reform scenario, is for an additional 2,590 hospital beds by 2031 (inpatient, day case, critical care) with an immediate requirement for 1,290 beds to address overcrowding and to ensure hospitals operated at 85% occupancy in line with other OECD countries. Approximately 770 additional beds have been provided to date. The National Development Plan provides for the addition of the full 2,590 beds by the earlier date of 2027.

The future opening of additional acute bed capacity will be considered in the context of the Estimates discussions for the years concerned 2020 and on the priorities in the HSE's National Service Plans for those years.

Hospital Staff

1032. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the number of extra hospital consultants that will be hired in 2020. [14863/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to reply directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Nursing Staff

1033. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the number of extra nurses that will be hired in 2020. [14864/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Disability Services Provision

1034. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the service providers here for adults with intellectual disabilities; the date each service provider will reopen; and the percentage of services that each provider will open in tabular form. [14865/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): 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.

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.

Disability Services Provision

1035. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the service providers here for children with intellectual disabilities; the date each service provider will reopen; and the percentage of services that each provider will open in tabular form. [14866/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): 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.

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.

Emergency Departments

1036. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the date on which a four-hour target will be applied to all emergency department waits. [14867/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE National Service Plan (NSP) sets out the type and volume of health and personal social services that the HSE undertakes to provide within its financial allocation each year. The NSP 2020 sets targets in relation to the waiting times of attendees of emergency departments (ED) for discharge or admission including specific targets for patients over 75.

The waiting time targets as envisaged within the Oireachtas Sláintecare Report will continue to underpin the development of the Capacity-Access priority programme being delivered as part of Sláintecare, in ensuring that capacity is put in place to meet the clinical demands on the health system and to reduce waiting times for treatment.

Primary Care Centres

1037. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the percentage of overall health spending being devoted to the provision of primary care services under the current departmental spending Estimates. [14868/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Primary care incorporates a range of multi-disciplinary services delivered by GP's, community nursing and health and social care professionals. The services provided include physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, paediatric homecare and community intervention teams.

The HSE's Primary Care Reimbursement Service (PCRS) supports the delivery of a wide range of these primary care services to the general public through over 7,000 primary care contractors across a range of community health schemes. These schemes form the infrastructure through which the Irish Health System delivers a significant proportion of Primary Care to the public. It is through PCRS that GPs receive a range of fees and allowances under the GMS scheme, although it should be noted that the total PCRS budget includes a range of other payments, the largest proportion of which is accounted for by drugs and medicines for both GMS and non-GMS payments.

The figures below exclude expenditure on social care services and local demand led services.

	2020
	€M
Primary Care	927
*PCRS	2,951
	3,878
Overall Total Budget	17,106
Primary Care share	22.7%

Note: The figures are as per the National Service Plan 2020. There was an additional €3m allocated to primary care for winter planning following publication of the NSP.

These figures have yet to be adjusted to take account of the funding provided to the Health Vote in relation to Covid 19.

* The PCRS figure excludes expenditure on local demand led services.”

HSE Regional Service Plans

1038. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health when he will announce the construction locations and timelines for new elective hospitals that he plans to build. [14869/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As you will recall, the National Development Plan stated that, “New dedicated ambulatory elective only hospital facilities will be introduced in Dublin Galway and Cork. These facilities will provide high volume, low complexity procedures on a day and outpatient basis, together with a range of ambulatory diagnostic services. The high volume of demand for such services in these major urban centres is sufficient to justify the construction of dedicated ambulatory centres.”

The Elective Hospitals Oversight Group is currently developing a high-level facilities spatial brief and order of magnitude costs which details the elective clustering of appropriate activities for each of the three facilities in Dublin, Cork and Galway. This will also include an output and facility specification, based on efficient and effective service delivery. This is due to be complete in the Autumn of 2020.

Health Services Reports

1039. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if he accepts the findings of the de Buitléir report into private activity in public hospitals; and the timeline for its implementation. [14870/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Sláintecare Report and the recommendations of the Report of the Independent Review Group established to examine Private Activity in Public Hospitals (“the de Buitléir Report”) each propose progression towards a strengthened public healthcare system, including through the phasing out of private activity from public hospitals. The current Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, contains specific commitments in relation to finalising the new Sláintecare consultant contract and legislating for public-only work in public hospitals, which are fundamental aspects of the Independent Review Group report necessary to support progression towards the goal of a single-tier public hospital system.

Home Help Service

1040. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the number of extra hours of home help he expects to fund in 2020; and the number of hours he is planning to deliver in 2021. [14871/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The Health Service Executive National Service Plan provides for 18.9 million home support hours to be delivered to 53,700 people and to provide a further 360,000 hours through intensive home care packages to 235 people.

COVID-19 is posing significant challenges for many areas of our Older People Services, including Home Support Services. In light of these unprecedented challenges, the HSE, at the outset, had to reassess its operation of Home Support Services nationally, to ensure that the assessed needs of those clients with the highest priority were and still are being met. The HSE, working with its approved home support service providers are endeavouring to maintain essential support services during this unprecedented public health emergency. In this context, the HSE has set out a prioritisation process for home support, which looks at delivering a service based on priority need across 4 priority categories.

As a result of that review of prioritisation, a number of clients with lower priority needs had their home support service temporarily ceased or reduced with the support of family members and/or alternative forms of volunteer provided local supports. In these cases, each client was contacted to advise of the assessment and decision, alternative support available and assistance given to ensure that essential requirements continue to be provided. The HSE continues to review both those clients whose home support service may have been temporarily suspended and those clients of higher priority currently in receipt of home support services.

The HSE is in the process of restoring services, where capacity exists. In order to maximise the capacity available, consideration has to be given to balancing delivery of service against suspended clients, clients assessed and waiting on commencement of home support services and the continued requirement to meet the needs of higher priority clients currently in receipt of services.

The level of funding available for the Department of Health in 2021 and the quantum of services to be provided by the HSE, including home support will be considered as part of the national Estimates and budgetary process and National Service Planning.

Emergency Departments

1041. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if there is an emergency medicine consultant present on a 24-hour basis in each emergency department across all acute hospitals; and if not, when there will be. [14872/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly on this matter.

Hospital Consultant Contracts

1042. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the date on which he plans to end pay inequality for hospital consultants. [14873/20]

1183. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his views on pay equalisation for hospital consultants; the actions will he take to secure this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15481/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1042 and 1183 together.

At present ‘new entrant’ consultants recruited since 1 October 2012 are on lower pay scales than those recruited prior to that date.

The De Buitléir Group established to examine how to give effect to the Sláintecare recom-

mentation on the removal of private practice from the public hospital system recommended the introduction of a Sláintecare ‘public only’ Contract going forward, with pay parity confined to consultants who would take up this contract. It specifically recommended that the contract be made available to any serving consultants who would choose to move to it in addition to all future recruits.

The Programme for Government provides for the finalisation of the new Sláintecare Consultant Contract and the introduction of related legislation to support ‘public-only work’ in public hospitals. The FEMPI Acts currently prohibit pay increases for serving public servants and will require amendment to enable pay increases for serving consultants who move to the Sláintecare ‘public only’ Consultant Contract.

It is my intention to commence engagement with the representative bodies in relation to this Programme for Government commitment as a matter of priority. It is through this engagement that all matters relating to consultants terms, conditions and additional supports will be considered.

General Practitioner Services

1043. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the extra funding he plans to provide for general practitioner services in 2020 and 2021. [14874/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The agreement reached between the Department of Health, the HSE, and the IMO on GP Contractual Reform and Service Development, finalised in May 2019, provided for phased increases in the rates of capitation and other allowances paid to GPs as well as for the introduction of new services, including the Chronic Disease Management Programme and supports for practices in areas of deprivation.

The additional cost of implementing the Agreement in 2019 was €27.3 million, with an additional €53 million required in 2020, bringing the total available funding for 2020 to over €80 million. A further funding requirement of €62.5 million is foreseen for 2021.

In addition to this, a package of measures to support general practice was introduced from 16 March last in order to take account of the impact of COVID on general practice and to ensure that GPs were in a position to provide essential COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 services. These measures included fees payable from 16 March for the provision of remote consultations, respiratory assessment clinics and extended opening hours. The cost of these supports to date is approximately €60 million and is expected to reach approximately €100 million by mid-August.

General Practitioner Services

1044. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health when he plans to put in a place a new general practitioner contract. [14875/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The existing General Medical Scheme contract has been modernised to a large extent by the agreement reached in 2019 between the Department of Health, the HSE and the IMO on a major package of GP contractual reform and service developments.

The Agreement introduces fees for new services such as the chronic disease management programme and therapeutic phlebotomy for GMS patients with haemochromatosis. It provides for a 10% increase in the rural GP allowance, an increase in the allowance paid to dispensing

GPs, and a targeted fund of €2 million to support practices in deprived urban areas. Maternity and paternity leave arrangements have been improved, in recognition of the need to ensure that general practice is compatible with doctors' family commitments. A wide-ranging set of modernisation measures have also been agreed in the areas such as eHealth and medicines management. In return for cooperation with these service developments and reforms, investment in general practice will increase by approximately 40% (or €210 million) over four years. At the end of 2019 95% GMS GPs (2,374) had accepted the terms of the Agreement.

The Agreement also includes a commitment to undertake a strategic review of GP services within the lifetime of the Agreement, to examine how best to ensure the provision of GP services in Ireland for the future. The outcome of this review will inform future contractual changes. Preparatory work for the review is beginning this year.

Health Screening Programmes

1045. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the way in which he will bring forward the reintroduction of all health screening programmes; and the changes he has made since he took up office in order to speed up the launch of such services that were announced under his predecessor. [14876/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The National Screening Service's (NSS) population-based screening programmes BreastCheck, CervicalCheck, BowelScreen and Diabetic RetinaScreen were temporarily paused in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

These measures aligned with the National Public Health Emergency Team's (NPHE) recommendations which have as their goal to minimise the spread of COVID 19. In making this decision, the health, wellbeing and safety of screening service users and staff is the priority for the NSS.

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented interruption to normal health services both in the community and acute hospitals. Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, the NSS has monitored the feasibility of restarting the four programmes.

As such, I am pleased to inform you that the phased resumption of the NSS population screening programmes has started as part of the HSE overall plan to resume its health services that had been paused due to the Covid-19 pandemic. CervicalCheck began sending invites and reminders to participants in its cervical screening programme on the 06 of July, Diabetic RetinaScreen will also resume screening in July. BreastCheck and BowelScreen will resume screening in September/October.

Health Screening Programmes

1046. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the details of the catch-up programme he is introducing in relation to health screening. [14877/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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

1047. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health when the HSE roadmap for reopening health services will be published. [14878/20]

1075. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health when the service continuity roadmap will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14975/20]

1159. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when he will publish the roadmap to restore non-Covid-19 healthcare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15438/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1047, 1075 and 1159 together.

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented interruption to normal health services both in the community and acute hospitals. While many vital services were maintained or re-structured to respond more appropriately to Covid-19 related risks and evolving needs, other services were suspended or delivered on a reduced basis.

To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically aligned and prioritised way, the HSE have published a Strategic Framework for 'Service Continuity in a Covid Environment'. This document was published on June 8th and can be found at the following link: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/service-continuity-in-a-covid-environment-a-strategic-framework-for-delivery.pdf>.

The implementation of the Framework will ensure service resumption is done in an integrated and phased manner. It will consolidate new ways of working and build on international knowledge.

The HSE are currently developing a Service Continuity Roadmap for the resumption of services across the health system.

The aim of the operational delivery system is to reintroduce services in a phased manner over the coming months. This approach is based on the assumptions that the virus transmission levels will remain low and that public health measures will continue to reduce.

It should be noted that not all services will return to pre-Covid activity levels due to infection prevention and control requirements and current social distancing measures to prevent further spikes of Covid infections.

Health Services Provision

1048. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the amount of extra diagnostics he plans to put into acute and non-acute settings in 2020. [14879/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE advises that a pilot project commenced in 2016 by the HSE Acute Hospitals Division to progress the collection of national radiology waiting list data. The project has been supported by the Radiology Clinical Care Programme and has involved key stakeholders across the system including the National Integrated Medical Imaging System (NIMIS) Team, Hospital Groups, and the support of the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) for data collection and data management expertise.

At present, the pilot project collects data relating to CT, MRI and Ultrasound. In Q1 2020, there were a total of 190,373 patients reported on the waiting list from all sites, this represents all outpatients waiting, urgent, semi urgent, routine and planned/surveillance (where diagnostic

access is planned at particular time intervals).

The HSE is currently rolling out a diagnostics plan that envisages a range of diagnostic/imaging services being provided across all Community Healthcare Organisations with the support of hospitals and private providers, with a particular focus on improving GP access to ultrasound. The Deputy may wish to note that in 2019, there were 67,000 ultrasound and 79,500 x-rays delivered via GP access to radiology services.

In terms of medium-term planning for additional diagnostic capacity, the National Development Plan states that, new dedicated ambulatory elective only hospital facilities will be introduced in Dublin, Galway and Cork. As per the Development plan, these facilities will provide high volume, low complexity procedures on a day and outpatient basis, together with a range of ambulatory diagnostic services.

As part of the wider Sláintecare implementation, the Elective Hospitals Oversight Group, established by the Department of Health, is currently developing a high-level facilities spatial brief and order of magnitude costs which details the elective clustering of appropriate activities for each of the three facilities in Dublin, Cork and Galway. This will also include an output and facility specification, based on efficient and effective service delivery, which will include diagnostic procedures. This is due to be completed in the Autumn of 2020.

Departmental Functions

1049. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if he has established an office for budgetary responsibility in his Department; if not, when he will establish it; and the resources that will be in the office [14880/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Ensuring Ireland's health system can deliver the best health outcomes and the best value for the citizen through optimising resources is a key part of the remit of the Department of Health.

In the last twelve months the resources assigned to budgetary oversight, expenditure and forecasting within my Department have expanded substantially in recognition of the ongoing challenges in relation to financial management within the health system. This additional resourcing has facilitated greater oversight and accountability in relation to budgetary performance. In addition the Health Budgetary Oversight Group and the Committee on Budgetary Oversight provide an additional layer of budgetary oversight in relation to health expenditure.

With the establishment of new Department portfolios following the formation of the new Government, it is important for a Department to review its resourcing to align it with any revision to the previous portfolio. An Office for Budget Responsibility will be considered as part of this review of resourcing.

National Children's Hospital

1050. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the full status of the new national children's hospital; the amount spent on the project to date; the revised timelines for the completion of the project; and if he is dedicating new resources to monitoring the construction and spend on the hospital [14881/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The NPHDB has statutory responsibility for planning, designing, building and equipping the new children's hospital and I have

referred your question to the NPHDB for direct reply.

Disability Services Funding

1051. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the extra funding resources that will be put into the disability sector in 2020. [14882/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As set out in the National Service Plan 2020, the 2020 disability budget is €2054.5m. This represents an increase of €138.7m or 7.2% on the 2019 budget.

In addition, the Government has agreed to allocate substantial additional funding to the Health Vote to meet the costs associated with the implementation of the measures outlined in the National Action Plan in response to COVID-19.

The HSE, through the Community Healthcare Organisations (CHOs) is actively engaging with any Section 38 and Section 39 disability service providers who are experiencing financial challenges, including access to cash acceleration, where appropriate, to maintain continuity of service provision during the pandemic. Organisations receiving funding from the HSE should raise any concerns in relation to financial issues that may have implications for continuity of service provision with the relevant Community Health Care Organisation (CHO) responsible for the service arrangements.

The HSE has agreed a structured approach to addressing the financial challenges of Section 39 service providers due to COVID-19. The objective of the programme is to provide a structured governance process and modus operandi through which Section 39 partners experiencing financial difficulties due to the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency can engage through the HSE to ensure, where appropriate, continuity of essential services provided by these agencies. The HSE has also developed a methodology to provide a pro forma approach to support decision making in respect of Section 39 Organisations that have made submissions to the HSE for both financial and non-financial supports during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The HSE has advised my Department that it has given Section 38 and Section 39 providers of disability services and supports assurance that budget allocations confirmed to each provider via the relevant CHO, will remain in place to year end, subject to co-operation with the HSE and compliance with the relevant Service Arrangements.

Other supports provided by CHOs to Section 38 and Section 39 organisations providing disability specialist services between March and May 2020 include PPE; Infection Prevention and Control support, advice and training; Public Health advice/support with regard to suspected/positive cases; Isolation facilities allied to testing, funding for emergency residential placements and logistics in the form of transport and accommodation. In addition, COVID response teams were put in place to assist and support residential service providers during the pandemic. These teams will now oversee and support the reshaping of disability services as a result of COVID 19.

A critical focus at this time is the assurance of value for money in delivering on the required patient services and population health needs to effectively manage COVID-19 infection within the Irish context. Accordingly, the financial implications of measures taken to mitigate impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak are matters which the Department of Health will continue to keep under review in conjunction with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, as the situation evolves.

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The Deputy will be aware of the COVID-19 Stability Fund for Community and Voluntary, Charity and Social Enterprises which is administered by Pobal, on behalf of the Department of Rural and Community Development. Organisations providing disability specialist services were eligible to apply to the Fund, which is now closed for applications. This scheme is intended to be a targeted once-off cash injection for organisations and groups delivering front-line services to the most at need in our society and in danger of imminent closure due to lost fundraised or traded income as a direct result of restrictions to counter the spread of COVID-19. The approval of funding under Tranche One of the Scheme was announced on 26 June. Further tranches will be announced over the coming weeks.

Question No. 1052 answered with Question No. 975.

Covid-19 Tests

1053. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health his plans to increase antibody testing for Covid-19; and the timelines there are for doing so. [14885/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The ECDC has advised that immunoassays detecting specific antibodies against SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) will play an important role in the future for epidemiological surveillance, evaluation of immunity and the outcome of future vaccination studies. However, the reliability of serological tests remains an issue as does the interpretation of what immunity means and how long such immunity might last. These remain active research questions.

The ECDC has reported that over 60 rapid SARS-CoV-2 antibody tests have been CE marked to date, and many more continue to be placed on the market. Prior to the introduction of new serological assays [antibody tests] clinical validation studies are required to confirm that test performance can be replicated in the context in which the test is intended to be used.

Following a request from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) the HSE and the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) are now undertaking a national population sero-prevalence study to measure exposure to COVID-19 infection in the population using an antibody blood test. This work is being carried out jointly by HPSC and the National Virus Reference Laboratory (NVRL), in collaboration with the Central Statistics Office and the Department of Health.

On Monday 15th June, the HSE issued letters to more than 5,000 people inviting them to participate in the Study to Investigate COVID-19 Infection in People Living in Ireland.

Participants in the study are representative of the wider population. Dublin and Sligo have been selected as sample locations as they represent areas of the country with higher and lower known levels of infection respectively. Using a representative sample of participants in both locations, it will be possible to provide an overall national estimate of infection in the Irish population.

Serological tests measure the antibody response in an individual. Antibodies to COVID-19 are produced over several weeks after infection with the virus. The presence of antibodies indicates that a person was infected with the COVID-19 virus, irrespective of whether the individual had severe or mild disease or even asymptomatic infection. The assessment of population immunity can help determine the level of antibodies required to achieve herd immunity, identify groups of susceptible individuals and evaluate the persistence and duration of protective antibodies.

The study will add to our knowledge about how long antibodies last and what protection they may provide against new infection of COVID-19.

According to the HSE, initial results are expected in late August and will enable the HPSC to estimate the level or prevalence of infection of COVID-19 in the population across different age groups.

Any decisions with regard to additional antibody testing will take into consideration the outcome of this study and any other relevant studies.

Departmental Bodies

1054. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the process he has in place for appointments to NPHE or its subgroups; and if he has changed that process since he became Minister. [14890/20]

1059. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if he will publish each of the recommendations and submissions that have guided the actions and decisions by the NPHE during the Covid-19 pandemic. [14901/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1054 and 1059 together.

As the Deputy is aware, the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) structure is a long-standing mechanism utilised over many years to steer health service responses to public health emergencies as required by Ireland's obligations under the World Health Organization's International Health Regulations.

These Regulations require State parties to establish multidisciplinary/multisectoral teams to respond to events that may constitute a public health emergency of international concern. This necessitates flexibility in the composition of these national teams in order that they can appropriately respond to major public health emergencies.

As the Deputy is no doubt aware, the NPHE for COVID-19 is accountable to me as Minister for Health and is made up of senior public officials of the Department of Health and a number of relevant State Agencies, in addition to highly qualified subject matter experts from disciplines such as virology, infectious diseases, intensive care etc. who are among the leading practitioners in their fields in this country.

The NPHE can add to its membership on the basis of the additional expertise or support it identifies as being required so as to ensure that it is in the best possible position to provide advice and recommendations for consideration by the Minister for Health and the Government. These are the criteria on which the NPHE identifies the requirement for particular expertise. This flexibility in approach to selection is necessary for a group such as this in the context of an international public health crisis of the kind we are currently experiencing due to the pandemic, and gives effect to Ireland's obligations to the WHO.

Consideration is currently being given to the national response to the emergence of Covid-19 that has been mounted to date with a view to ensuring that as a country we are as well prepared as possible for the coming period and any potential resurgence in the virus, and that will of course include ensuring that the NPHE continues to be in a position to offer evidence based advice and recommendations to me and the Government as the situation evolves.

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With regard to the Deputy's question in relation to the publication of recommendations and submissions, a wide range of documentation related to NPHET has been published to date and it is intended to continue this process to ensure transparency. Letters, agendas, and minutes arising from the NPHET are available on the Department of Health website. I might add that papers discussed at the NPHET meetings from 30 January 2020 to 25 February 2020 inclusive are available to view on the DOH website at <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/691330-national-public-health-emergency-team-covid-19-coronavirus/>.

Work is continuing to place the papers from further NPHET meetings on the website as quickly as possible, with additional papers to be published regularly going forward.

HSE Board

1055. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the dates and times of the meetings of the HSE board to date in 2020. [14891/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health Service Executive (Governance) Act 2019 requires the HSE Board to hold such and so many meetings as may be necessary for the due fulfilment of its functions, but in each year shall hold not fewer than one meeting in each of 11 months of that year. In accordance with this legislation the HSE Board has an agreed schedule of monthly meetings and additional meetings are scheduled as required.

To date in 2020 the Board has held 22 meetings comprising 6 regular monthly meetings and 16 additional Special COVID-19 Board Meetings.

Dates and Times of HSE Board Meetings 2020

Date	Time
31st January 2020:	10:00- 15:30
28th February 2020:	10:00- 15:30
27th March 2020:	10:00- 15:30
24th April 2020:	10:00- 14:00
27th May 2020:	11:00- 14:50
26th June 2020:	10:00- 16.45

Dates and Times of Special COVID-19 Board Meetings 2020

6th March 2020:	11:00- 12:30
9th March 2020:	18:30- 20:00
12th March 2020	19:00- 20:15
16th March 2020:	18:00- 20:15
25th March 2020:	17:45- 19:30
1st April 2020:	18:00- 19:40
8th April 2020:	18:00- 20:00
15th April 2020:	18:00- 20:10
22nd April 2020:	18:00- 20:40
29th April 2020:	18:00- 19:45
6th May 2020:	18:00- 19:45
13th May 2020:	18:00- 20.10
20th May 2020:	18:00- 20:30
22nd May 2020:	13:00- 13:42
3rd June 2020:	18:00- 19.45

Covid-19 Pandemic

1056. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health his views on the reason so many healthcare professionals have been infected with Covid-19; and the details of the investigation he will commence to address this. [14892/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Data on cases in healthcare workers is published by the HPSC and is available here: https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/surveillance/covid-19casesinhealthcareworkers/COVID-19_HCW_weekly_report_19062020_v1.0%20for%20website.pdf.

The Irish Epidemiological Modelling Advisory Group has developed a methodology to determine the recovery rate by considering the number of hospitalisations, ICU admissions, deaths and the dates of confirmation for each case. They have advised the Department that as of 3rd June, our recovery rate in healthcare workers is 93%. This is a higher recovery rate than in the general population, because relatively few healthcare workers have been hospitalised and very few admitted to ICU.

It is worth noting that Ireland, in contrast with many other countries, maintains a very wide definition of a healthcare worker for surveillance purposes and hence international comparisons should be interpreted with caution. In Ireland, a healthcare worker is anyone who works in any area of healthcare across community and hospital settings. It includes, for example, administrative staff, catering, maintenance, IT etc whereas in many other countries it is a considerably narrower definition of frontline workers or even just doctors and nurses. Our very broad definition of healthcare worker along with extensive testing contribute to our proportion of all COVID-19 infections that have been in healthcare workers.

There have been several studies worldwide of healthcare worker COVID-19 infection rates which have shown an infection rate of 5 to 10% of HCWs, whereas in Ireland this rate is close to 3-4% of HCWs based on estimates from the CSO Labour Force Survey of between 225,000 and 250,000 people working in Ireland who would identify as healthcare workers or as working in a healthcare setting.

In an article published by Hunter et al in the Lancet, on 2nd of May 2020 referred to a study in Newcastle (UK) on the 10th and 11th of March, where a random sample of hospital healthcare workers were tested and 5% were COVID-19 positive. This random sample testing was repeated on the 30th and 31st of March and 20% of healthcare workers were COVID-19 positive.

In a Dutch study (Eurosurveillance, Reuskin et al, 26/03/2020), 400 healthcare were tested between the 27th of February and the 6th of March 2020 and 2.5% were positive for COVID-19. Between the 6th and the 8th of March 2020, 1,100 HCWs were tested and 4.1% were COVID-19 positive.

As such, it would not appear that the rates of infection among Irish healthcare workers are not out of line with the experiences of comparator countries. However, I have asked my officials to examine this issue further so as to ensure that we are doing everything possible in relation to this crucial aspect of the response to Covid-19.

Nursing Staff

1057. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether the remuneration of nurses in the HSE is fair and comparable to nurses on both a European and global level. [14893/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In 2018, the Public Service Pay Commission (PSPC) published a report on the recruitment and retention of staff in the public health service. This report included the findings from external experts on international pay comparisons for each cohort, including nursing. The report concluded that Ireland is competitive relative to other markets in terms of security benefits such as pension, maternity leave, sick leave and long-term disability benefits, though it also found that there was a case for providing additional incentives for qualified nursing and midwifery staff to remain in the public health service.

The report recommended increases to certain fixed allowances and an extension of those allowances to other working areas for nurses and midwives. It also recommended accelerated career progression for Staff Nurses, reducing the length of service requirement for Staff Nurses wishing to progress to Senior Staff Nurses. These measures were accepted by Government as part of the overall 2019 Nursing Agreement. That agreement included additional measures that improved pay and allowances for certain nursing grades, including the creation of an Enhanced Nurse Practice scale as well as further extending the application of the location allowance to those nurses working in medical and surgical areas. In addition, it also provided for the setting up of an Expert Review Body on Nursing and Midwifery and this is due to commence its activity on 30 July 2020. I look forward to reviewing the report of the Expert Review Body in due course.

While noting the PSPC's findings on international comparisons, the remuneration measures arising from the Nursing Agreement should further assist in making a career in Nursing in Ireland more attractive.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1058. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health his plans to employ new methods to ensure nursing homes nationally have enough staff and PPE. [14900/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Covid-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented challenge across our health services. As the disease has progressed, a range of enhanced measures for nursing homes recommended by NPHET on 31st March and 3rd April are being implemented. The enhanced measures build on actions already adopted for nursing homes, including general and specific infection prevention measures, specific public health and clinical nursing home guidance published March 17th and subsequently updated, social distancing measures, visitor restrictions and cocooning. A number of webinars were delivered in March and April to provide support and advice to nursing homes including in relation to infection prevention and control.

While nursing home providers are ultimately responsible for the safe care of their residents the HSE is providing staffing, PPE, Oxygen, training and other supports to nursing homes where needed. The HSE has an established process in place for access to PPE and this is the appropriate avenue for nursing homes to engage as required. It has also established 23 HSE COVID Response Teams across the CHOs, to provide support and expert guidance to all long-term care residential settings. These teams comprise of a Director of Nursing as well as clinical and public health expertise and links to acute hospitals.

Together with this unprecedented support to the nursing home sector a COVID-19 Tempo-

rary Assistance Payment Scheme has been established to support nursing home providers by contributing towards additional COVID-19 costs such as staffing, enhanced cleaning and infection prevention and control. The original scheme was due to end on June 30, after 3 months, however the scheme has now been extended for a further 3 months until the end of September. This extension will give further support and certainty to this sector.

Furthermore on foot of a National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) recommendation, on 23 May a COVID-19 Expert Panel on Nursing Homes was established, to examine the complex issues surrounding the management of COVID-19 among this particularly vulnerable cohort.

The purpose of the Panel is to examine the national and international responses to the COVID-19 crisis, and to examine the emerging best practice. Its main objective is to provide immediate real-time learnings and recommendations in light of the expected ongoing impact of COVID-19 over the next 12-18 months. COVID-19 is a new disease, which can present atypically in the frail elderly, and new evidence and best practice in its management are constantly emerging. I expect the Expert Panel to submit their final report to me later this month.

Question No. 1059 answered with Question No. 1054.

Health Services Access

1060. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether an e-health card or number should be introduced; and if so, the timeline he would envisage for such work. [14907/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Department of Health's eHealth strategy for Ireland examined the international experience of eHealth including the use of health cards, noting the concerns around privacy, security, trust and additionally, the sensitivity requirement for health smart cards. There are no plans to introduce an 'e-health card' at present.

In relation to health numbers, work is progressing within the HSE on the deployment of individual health identifiers (IHI) across the health service, in line with the provisions of the Health Identifiers Act 2014. The IHI is a unique number that will be used to safely identify an individual and their health information when using a health service and will ensure patient safety and privacy and drive improvements in patient care and efficiencies in the health service.

Health Services Provision

1061. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health his plans to reopen St. Michael's unit, Clonmel, County Tipperary. [14920/20]

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

Hospital Services

1062. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health when St. Brigid's Hospital, Carrick-on-Suir, will reopen as a unit for respite and palliative care. [14921/20]

1081. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if and when St. Brigid's Hospital, Carrick-on-Suir, will return to its normal service, that is, a geriatric facility; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14992/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1062 and 1081 together.

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

General Practitioner Services

1063. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Health when the general practitioner visit card will be extended to children under eight years of age; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14927/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): On 25 June, the Government gave approval for the publication of the Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Bill 2020. This Bill provides, amongst other things, for the phased expansion of GP care without fees to all children aged 12 years and under. The Bill was published on July 01, 2020 and it is expected to proceed through the Houses of the Oireachtas in mid-July.

The initial stage of this phased expansion will be the provision of GP care without fees to all children aged between 6 and 8. I am currently reviewing the situation in relation to this expansion to determine how and when this expanded service can be introduced in a way which will meet the ongoing health needs of children and will also be sustainable for General Practice in the current COVID environment.

Hospital Facilities

1064. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Health if the commitment to the building of a second cath lab at University Hospital Waterford will be reaffirmed; if so, the date on which a build contract will be signed off; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14928/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Estates unit in the Health Service Executive has been tasked with the delivery of additional capacity (infrastructure and equipment) nationwide in the effort for the containment and prevention of the spread of the Coronavirus - COVID-19. This has resulted in delays to works and schedules.

Funding has been allocated in the Capital Plan for the provision of 2nd Cath Lab at University Hospital Waterford. Planning Permission is in place for this project and applications for fire and disability certification are currently in progress. It is anticipated the project will go to tender in late August/early September – subject to approval. As required by OGP, tender is a 2 stage process for Main and Specialist contractors. This process will take approximately 4 months.

At present the draft Capital Plan 2020 is being reviewed and revised to take account of the impact of Covid-19 which resulted in delays on many projects and the funding of an emergency Covid-19 programme of works. Once the HSE has finalised its Capital Plan for 2020, it will then be submitted to me for consideration.

Motorised Transport Grant

1065. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health if he will review the 2013 decision to end the motorised transport grant with a view to reinstating same (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14932/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): Two schemes, the Mobility Allowance and Motorised Transport Grant, were put in place in 1979 and 1968 respectively, for operation by the Health Service Executive (HSE) at a time when there was limited availability of accessible public transport. The Government decided to close these administrative schemes in 2013, on foot of the reports of the Ombudsman in 2011 and 2012 regarding the legal status of both Schemes in the context of the Equal Status Acts. The Review Group on Transport Supports for People with a Disability reported to Government in 2013 and the Report informed the deliberative process for proposals for a new Scheme.

In 2013, the Government also decided to continue payment of the monthly Mobility Allowance on an interim basis, to those who were in receipt of the Mobility Allowance at the time that the Scheme closed. Of the 4,700 individuals in receipt of the Mobility Allowance (€9 million per annum) when the Scheme closed in 2013, there were 3,831 people in receipt of the interim payments at July 2019.

With regard to the Motorised Transport Grant, this scheme operated as a means-tested grant to assist persons with severe disabilities with the purchase or adaptation of a car, where that car was essential to retain employment. The maximum Motorised Transport Grant, which was payable once in any three-year period was €5,020. Following closure of the scheme in February 2013, no further Motorised Transport Grants have been payable.

At the whole of Government level, the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 sets the overall framework for the equal participation of people with disabilities in society. Monitoring of the implementation of the Strategy is being overseen by the National Disability Inclusion Strategy Steering Group which comprises key Government Departments, the National Disability Authority and the Disability Stakeholders Group.

Under the Strategy, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport has responsibility for the continued development of accessibility and availability of accessible public transport and is committed to the continued development of accessible public transport in recognition of the importance of such services to the lives of people with disabilities.

Recent developments which will impact on policy options regarding the provision of transport supports for people with a disability include the following:

The ongoing progress by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in providing accessible public transport nationally and that Department's public consultation launched on 14 November last, to review active travel and public transport policy, including accessible public transport;

The Cost of Disability Study currently underway which was commissioned by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection as part of Budget 2019. The research, when complete, will inform policy direction in relation to the provision of adequate supports to meet the needs of people with disabilities, including transport costs, and;

The Working Group established by the Department of Justice and Equality under Action 104 of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy which states that:- 'We will lead a review of transport supports encompassing all Government funded transport and mobility schemes for

people with disabilities, to enhance the options for transport to work or employment supports for people with disabilities and will develop proposals for development of a coordinated plan for such provision. This plan will have regard to making the most efficient use of available transport resources.”

Hospital Facilities

1066. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health if he will examine the feasibility of upgrading Ennis general hospital to a grade 3 facility in order that the hospital can again perform elective procedures (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14933/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the query raised by the Deputy relates to an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply to you directly.

Hospital Appointments Status

1067. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of an appointment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14935/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to pause most elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) and in accordance with World Health Organisation guidelines, and the National Action Plan.

To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, the HSE launched its Strategic Framework for ‘Service Continuity in a Covid Environment’ on 24th June 2020. Its implementation will ensure service resumption is done in an integrated way. This will involve a phased approach to ensure community services are strengthened. The Framework will also consolidate new ways of working and build on international knowledge. The HSE is currently developing a Service Continuity Roadmap for the resumption of services across the health system. My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working together to evaluate the impact of Covid 19 on Scheduled Care waiting lists, in order to be prepared to address pent up demand.

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 is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 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.

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 Aids and Appliances

1068. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health when a chair will be received for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14939/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Departmental Budgets

1069. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the amount his Department sought in its Estimate bid in each of the years 2017 to 2020 in terms of additional funding to maintain existing levels of service taking account of demographics; and the amount allocated to ELS and demographics in each year. [14946/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The previous government maintained its commitment to investment in health services during its term. Each year the Health Service Executive sets out in its National Service Plan the allocation of the funding received from government for the delivery of health services for the year.

The amount allocated each year follows an extensive process of engagement between my Department and the Department of Expenditure and Reform, which considered both the funding requirements and the fiscal position. These types of engagements are a normal part of the Budgetary process and happen with Departments across Government. All Departments put forward spending proposals but are required to operate within the amounts proposed by Government and determined by the Dáil.

The issue of health funding is a major policy challenge for both the Irish and international Governments. Despite welcome increases annually, the need for effective financial management remains crucial as the health service deals with a larger and older population, with more acute health and social care requirements, increased demand for new and existing drugs and the rising costs of health technology. The costs associated with these service pressures will increasingly need to be managed not solely through annual increased Exchequer allocations but also through improved efficiencies, productivity and value from within the funding base.

Funding is provided to the HSE for Health services in accordance with the letter of determination which sets out the approved level of overall HSE expenditure for the year in question.

From the table below you can see the majority of the funding for the period 2017 to 2020 has been allocated to pay cost pressures and maintaining existing levels of service, taking account of demographic changes. These allocations are balanced with new developments seeking to continuously improve the Irish health system and the growing costs arising from pensions and the state claims agency.

2017 saw the commencement of the unwinding of the savings delivered under the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act 2009; this combined with other national pay agreements since 2016 has had a significant impact on the funding required to address pay cost pressures annually.

Significant funding is also allocated towards maintaining existing levels of service.

Description	Increase in 2016	Increase in 2017	Increase in 2018	Increase in 2019	Increase in 2020
HSE	€m	€m	€m	€m	€m
Pay Cost Pressures	59	174	278	287	276
ELS/Demo-graphics	401	244	491	254	430
New Developments	137	81	196	199	168
State Claims and Pensions	139	154	96	107	133
HSE Total	736	653	1,061	847	1,007*

* An additional €50m for new developments was included in the original Revised Estimate for 2020 in addition to the allocation provided in the Budget 2020 Expenditure Report. Provision was also made in relation to preparation for the impact of Brexit.

Departmental Budgets

1070. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the amount his Department is seeking in terms of additional funding to maintain existing levels of service taking account of demographics for 2021. [14947/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): My Department will shortly be engaging in dialogue with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Health Service Executive in relation to the 2021 Estimates, and this process will include an analysis of the potential impact of demographic change.

Until these discussions are concluded it would not be appropriate for me to comment on this matter.

Medicinal Products

1071. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health if the Spinraza treatment has been stopped for persons (details supplied); and when the treatment will commence [14951/20]

1096. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health the reason 12 children with SMA are still waiting to be treated with Spinraza one year after the drug was approved; the reason for the delay; when the matter will finally be addressed by the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15076/20]

1154. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the number of children with spinal muscular atrophy eligible for treatment with the approved drug Spinraza; the number of those receiving the treatment; the reason for the delay in treatment for some of these children such as a child (details supplied); the way in which and when these issues will be addressed in order that all children can receive this vital treatment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15427/20]

1223. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health when Spinraza will be made available for children with spinal muscular atrophy; and if he will make a statement on the mat-

ter. [15570/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1071, 1096, 1154 and 1223 together.

The HSE has statutory responsibility for medicine pricing and reimbursement decisions, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

On 11 June 2019, the HSE Leadership Team approved access to the drug Nusinersen (Spinraza) for children with Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) Type I, II or III on an exceptional and individualised basis.

The HSE decision process in relation to Spinraza involved a full Health Technology Assessment followed by detailed consideration by the HSE expert groups on new drug therapies, including the Technology Review Group for Rare Diseases and the Drugs Committee. Evidence of the clinical effectiveness of this new drug therapy was also reviewed.

The recommendation is to approve access for children with genetically confirmed SMA Type I, II or III, in accordance with the controlled access criteria recommended by the Rare Diseases Technology Review Committee. The rare diseases committee recommendation was clearly targeted at the youngest and most severely affected SMA patients, and this group is the clear priority for the HSE. The actual patient assessment and approval process will be the means for determining access on an individual case by case basis.

The actual delivery of this medicine to approved patients in a safe and sustainable way requires very specific and quite complex service arrangements to be put in place by Children's Health Ireland (CHI) across all sites.

It is estimated that 1-3 new children will be diagnosed with SMA Type 2 in Ireland each year. CHI has confirmed that there are currently 34 patients with SMA aged 18 years or under who are deemed clinically eligible for treatment with Spinraza by the Paediatric Neurologist in CHI. CHI has further confirmed that 18 patients are currently receiving Spinraza.

However, other patients who were waiting to start treatment have been put on hold due to COVID-19. CHI has confirmed that a Clinical Nurse Manager is commencing at the end of July, and that they are currently working through the remaining patients and how they can be accommodated in the midst of COVID-19 restrictions around social distancing. Individual treatment plans are being worked up for each of the remaining patients.

CHI has confirmed that it is in a continuous engagement process with families regarding their child's individual plan for the administration of Spinraza, as well as representatives of SMA Executive and Advocacy Group.

Care of the Elderly

1072. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health his views on a matter regarding day care centres (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14961/20]

1193. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health when day care centres for the elderly will be able to open again; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15491/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1072 and 1193 together.

Community services such as day care play an important role in enabling older people to continue living in their communities. My Department and the 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 and the 'Return to work safely' protocol. 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 means that services, whilst being delivered in new ways, will gradually be restored to older people.

Legislative Process

1073. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health the status of the outcome of the 2019 public consultation in respect of regulations to be made under sections 12 and 13 of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14964/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): A public consultation was hosted by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland on the regulations to be made on the labelling and advertising of alcohol products under the Public Health (Alcohol) Act. Almost 300 submissions were received by the FSAI and on foot of these a Report was submitted to my Department.

The results of the consultation are forming part of the considerations in the development of the draft regulations. Prior to being finalised those draft regulations will require notification to the European Commission for assessment.

Health Services Staff

1074. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if a person (details supplied) will be offered alternative employment other than in the ambulance service in view of the fact that the person's health suffered; if, in the circumstances, it might be possible to meet their requirements in another Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14973/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly on this matter.

Question No. 1075 answered with Question No. 1047.

HSE Correspondence

1076. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health the status of a contract negotiated by the HSE with a company (details supplied); if he will liaise with the HSE on the matter as the company cannot get a response from the HSE procurement division in terms of furthering the delivery; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14977/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this question concerns a contractual matter between the HSE and a particular commercial entity, I have referred the question to the agency for direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Facilities

1077. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health the timeline to produce and issue a build tender for planned cath lab at University Hospital Waterford; the planned contract close date, build and completion dates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14978/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Estates unit in the Health Service Executive has been tasked with the delivery of additional capacity (infrastructure and equipment) nationwide in the effort for the containment and prevention of the spread of the Corona-virus - COVID-19. This has resulted in delays to some works and schedules.

Funding has been allocated in the Capital Plan for the provision of 2nd Cath Lab at University Hospital Waterford. Planning Permission is in place for this project and applications for fire and disability certification are currently in progress. It is anticipated the project will go to tender in late August / early September – subject to approval. As required by OGP, tender is a 2 stage process for Main and Specialist contractors. This will take approximately 4 months with construction expected to begin thereafter.

Hospital Facilities

1078. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health the timeline to recommence modifications to the existing cath lab at University Hospital Waterford; the reason no Covid-19 test was offered to foreign engineers to allow them on-site access at any stage up to the lifting of travel restrictions in view of the fact the refit was classed as essential work; the further reason an infection control protocol initiated by hospital management precluded access to the existing cardiac suite to allow modifications to continue in further view of the fact it is at the opposite end of the campus and in further view of the fact only two Covid-19 patients were being treated in the separately housed Dunmore wing of the hospital; the definitive date the existing lab modifications will be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14979/20]

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

Hospital Groups

1079. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health the reason the seat left vacant on the advisory board of the south west hospital group by the promotion of a person (details supplied) has not been made available to another candidate; if the board is soon to be disbanded, the finish date; if the board is not being disbanded within a period of two months of 14 June 2020, if the other candidate will be appointed to the board; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14980/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In 2017, the former Minister for Health, Minister Simon Harris, approved a process whereby Hospital Group Board vacancies would be publicly advertised on the State Boards portal (www.stateboards.ie) operated by the Public Appointments Service (PAS), in line with DPER Guidelines on Appointments to State Boards.

Members of the South South West Hospital Group Board were selected through this process.

As you are aware, the Oireachtas Committee on the Future of Healthcare Sláintecare Report (2017) recommended the alignment of hospital and community health and social care services into cohesive geographical regions to facilitate population-based resource allocation and governance to enable integrated care.

The announcement, in 2019, of six new regional health areas is the first step in organising person-centred health and social care services focussed on the needs of populations within specific regions. The Sláintecare Programme Implementation Office is working with all hospital groups and CHOs to inform the development of detailed proposals in this regard.

HSE Waiting Lists

1080. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the waiting time for patients referred to the pain clinic in Galway; the reason the issue of long waiting lists at the clinic has not been addressed; the steps he plans to take to address the long waiting lists for appointments and treatment in view of the suffering delayed pain treatment is causing persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14983/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to pause most elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and in accordance with World Health Organisation guidelines, and the National Action Plan.

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.

Where possible, hospitals are working to find innovative ways to enable service provision, which include virtual clinics for some outpatient 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>).

To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, the HSE launched its Strategic Framework for ‘Service Continuity in a Covid Environment’ on 24 June. Its implementation will ensure service resumption is done in an integrated way. This will involve a phased approach to ensure community services are strengthened. The Framework will also consolidate new ways of working and build on international knowledge. The HSE is currently developing a Service Continuity Roadmap for the resumption of services across the health system.

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 data requested concerning waiting list figures for Pain Relief at Galway University Hospital is outlined in the attached document. There are currently no outpatients on the waiting list for Pain Relief at GUH.

[Table - Waiting list figures]

In relation to service provision for pain relief at Galway University Hospital, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

Question No. 1081 answered with Question No. 1062.

Hospital Facilities

1082. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health when the births, deaths and marriages office will reopen at St. Mary's hospital, Thurles, County Tipperary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14999/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is an operational matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Nursing Homes Support Scheme

1083. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health the wait time for funding to be made available for applicants approved for the nursing home support scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14994/20]

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

HSE Regional Service Plans

1084. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the provision of the awaited development phase of Naas General Hospital, the new national children's hospital and other similar capital projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15001/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Estates unit in the Health Service Executive has been tasked with the delivery of additional capacity (infrastructure and equipment) nationwide in the effort for the containment and prevention of the spread of the coronavirus - Covid-19. This has resulted in delays to some works and schedules.

The project to provide a new Endoscopy Unit at Naas General Hospital is part of the draft Capital Plan, with funding being provided to go to tender with this project in 2020. At present the draft Capital Plan is being reviewed and revised to take account of the impact of Covid-19 delays on projects and the funding of an emergency Covid-19 programme of works.

The NPHDB has statutory responsibility for planning, designing, building and equipping the New Children's Hospital and I have referred this part of your question to the NPHDB for direct reply.

Health Services Provision

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1085. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which comparable replacement public hospital bed provision has been provided following the closure of St. Brigid's hospital, Crooksling; the current or proposed use of the premises and lands at Crooksling; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15009/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the management of the public healthcare property estate, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to you in relation to this matter.

Hospital Data

1086. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the number of elective procedures and appointments, for example, smear tests, test results and meeting a consultant, that had to be cancelled or deferred in the mid-west region in counties Clare, Limerick and Tipperary in tabular form. [15011/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to pause most elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and in accordance with World Health Organisation guidelines, and the National Action Plan.

To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, the HSE launched its Strategic Framework for 'Service Continuity in a Covid Environment' on 24th June 2020. Its implementation will ensure service resumption is done in an integrated way. This will involve a phased approach to ensure community services are strengthened. The Framework will also consolidate new ways of working and build on international knowledge. The HSE is currently developing a Service Continuity Roadmap for the resumption of services across the health system. My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working together to evaluate the impact of Covid 19 on Scheduled Care waiting lists, in order to be prepared to address pent up demand.

In relation to the particular query raised concerning the deferral or cancellation of procedures and appointments in counties Clare, Limerick and Tipperary, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

Health Services Provision

1087. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the status of treatment for a person (details supplied). [15015/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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 pause all non-urgent elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and in accordance with the World Health Organisation, and the National Action Plan. The trajectory of the disease means there is now an opportunity for increasing the provision of non-Covid care including more routine care.

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

1088. **Deputy Malcolm Noonan** asked the Minister for Health if persons who are eligible for a general medical card under the new criteria once enacted will receive a refund for prescription costs incurred from July 2020 (details supplied). [15019/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Bill 2020 was published on 1 July. This Bill provides, amongst other things, for the necessary legislative amendments to increase the weekly gross medical card income limits for those aged 70 and over to €550 per week for a single person (currently €500 per week) and to €1,050 for a couple (currently €900 per week).

The Bill is expected to proceed through the Houses of the Oireachtas in mid-July.

Eligibility for a medical card is granted on the date when a completed application has been assessed and the applicant is awarded eligibility for a medical card under the scheme guidelines. Expenditure incurred prior to qualifying for a medical card is not reimbursable.

Hospital Appointments Status

1089. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive an appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15021/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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

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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 pause all non-urgent elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and in accordance with the World Health Organisation, and the National Action Plan. The trajectory of the disease means there is now an opportunity for increasing the provision of non-Covid care including more routine care.

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.

Mental Health Services

1090. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the budget for mental health provision in 2020; the priority areas to which the funding will be allocated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15024/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Budget 2020 increased funding to HSE mental health services by €39 million to €1.026 billion. This is an increase of over €315 million since 2012, or 44%, and represents a continued commitment to mental health.

Of the 2020 Budget, €13 million is for the continued roll-out of new developments in 2020, including the new National Forensic Hospital in Portrane, and progression of the recently launched national mental health policy, Sharing the Vision - A Mental Health Policy for Everyone.

€26 million has been allocated for other costs, including pay, which will be used to maintain funding and enhance existing services.

To date, €0.382 million new development funding has been released for the Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) Connect and a dialectical behaviour therapy training project.

Additionally, the Department of Health and Sláintecare have allocated €2.2 million for a mental health promotion and well-being campaign. This funding is enabling the HSE to provide enhanced online and telephone supports for health professionals and members of the public, for lower level mental health issues, such as stress and anxiety, arising from Covid-19.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1091. **Deputy Malcolm Noonan** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding hospital-acquired infection of Covid-19 by hospital and patient outcome; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15035/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the information sought is an operational matter this Question has been referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Ministerial Responsibilities

1092. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health and older people; and the date those delegated functions come into effect [15054/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Deputy Mary Butler has been appointed as Minister of State at the Department of Health with responsibility for mental health and older people. Work has commenced to assign relevant powers and duties to the Minister of State.

Ministerial Responsibilities

1093. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the delegated functions assigned to the Minister of State with responsibility for public health, well being and national drugs strategy; and the date those delegated functions come into effect [15055/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Deputy Frank Feighan has been appointed as Minister of State at the Department of Health with responsibility for Public Health, Well Being and National Drugs Strategy. Work has commenced to assign relevant powers and duties to the Minister of State.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1094. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the consideration given to those who are hearing impaired and the challenges facing them with facemasks that prevent lip reading and other facial cues that assist them in understanding interactions [15059/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I would like to assure the Deputy that my Department appreciates the concerns raised around face coverings with regard to those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

I understand that the Irish Deaf Society and Chime, in partnership with the HSE, have prepared resources for use by healthcare workers and deaf or hard of hearing patients and there has been collaboration on guidelines for staff, communication supports and videos in Irish Sign Language. Further information can be found at the following link: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/partner-resources/covid-19-irish-sign-language-isl-resources/covid-19-irish-sign-language-isl-resources.html>.

The evidence relating to the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the discussion around face coverings, masks and shields is constantly evolving. It is important to note that the public health advice relating to Covid-19 is kept under continuing review by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The Expert Advisory Group (EAG) of the NPHE has also been proactively

examining all relevant evidence relating to the virus and the issue of face covering. The EAG has requested the Health Information and Quality Authority to prepare a revised and updated evidence synthesis on face coverings and I have been informed that this paper is expected to be finalised shortly.

Assisted Human Reproduction

1095. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a query raised in correspondence regarding assisted human reproduction from a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15072/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

The provisions relating to surrogacy are outlined in Part 6 of the General Scheme. These provisions outline the specific conditions under which surrogacy in Ireland will be permitted, including a requirement for all surrogacy agreements to be pre-authorised by the AHR Regulatory Authority. The General Scheme also sets out a court-based mechanism through which the parentage of a child born through surrogacy may be transferred from the surrogate (and her husband, if applicable) to the intending parent(s).

In addition, under the surrogacy provisions at least one of the intending parents will have to be genetically related to the child. Surrogacy will be permitted on an altruistic basis where the payment of defined and receiptable reasonable expenses will be allowed. However, commercial surrogacy in Ireland will be prohibited as it raises a number of concerns relating to the welfare and commodification of the children involved as well as the potential risks of coercion and exploitation of financially vulnerable women to act as surrogates.

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 recently-published Programme for Government affirms this Government's intention to enact this legislation.

Finally, it would be prudent for any individual considering taking part in a surrogacy agreement prior to the relevant legislative and regulatory framework being in place to seek legal advice on the matter.

Question No. 1096 answered with Question No. 1071.

Assisted Human Reproduction

1097. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health if the process for the passage of urgent legislation to provide a clear legal framework in respect of assisted human reproduction will be expedited; the timeframe for the passage of this legislation and its commencement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15078/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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: gamete (sperm or egg) and embryo donation for AHR and research; surrogacy; pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) of embryos; posthumous assisted reproduction; and embryo and stem cell research. 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 recently-published Programme for Government affirms this Government's intention to enact this legislation.

Thalidomide Victims Compensation

1098. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter regarding the case of a person (details supplied). [15084/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): The supports provided to the 29 Irish survivors of thalidomide include a monthly payment for life, a medical card on an administrative basis regardless of means, provision of appliances, artificial limbs, equipment, housing adaptations and access to a full range of primary care, hospital and personal social services. My Department also provides once-off ex-gratia grants to survivors towards the cost of health and personal social services. These supports are provided directly from a dedicated Department of Health subhead "Payments in respect of disablement caused by Thalidomide".

There is a designated senior manager in the Health Service Executive, to act as the National Thalidomide Liaison in respect of the ongoing health and personal social service needs of Irish survivors. I have arranged for the matter to be investigated and a separate reply will issue to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Primary Care Centres

1099. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the status of the provision of a primary care centre at a location (details supplied); if the site selection process has been completed; the planned timeline for construction to begin; the facilities which will be available there; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15088/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

HSE Data

1100. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons employed by the HSE (details supplied) within the administrative and front-line sectors; and the percentage spend on salaries for both sections with the HSE annual budget. [15122/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Cannabis for Medicinal Use

1101. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health his plans to legalise cannabis during his term as Minister; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15137/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): The Programme for Government highlights concern about the increasing prevalence of illegal drug use over recent decades. Cannabis use by adolescents, in particular, is worrying as it poses risks of dependence and developing psychotic illness. Accordingly, the Government has no plans to legalise cannabis during its term of office.

The Programme for Government sets out a health-led approach to drug misuse. By treating the use of substances as a public health issue, rather than solely as a criminal issue, we can better help individuals, their families and the communities in which we live.

The National Drugs Strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, A health-led response to drug and alcohol use in Ireland 2017-2025, provides a roadmap to achieving these aims, by promoting a more compassionate and humane approach to people who use drugs, with drug use treated first and foremost as a public health issue.

The Programme for Government affirms the Government's commitment to implementing the recommendations of the Working Group on alternative approaches to the possession of drugs for personal use, as an important step in developing a public health led approach to drug use in this country. This approach will connect people who use drugs with health services and a pathway to recovery, avoiding a criminal conviction, which can have far-reaching consequences for people, particularly younger people. The Government will undertake a review of this alternative approach to ensure it is meeting all of its aims, following the first full year of implementation, and make any necessary changes.

The Department of Health, as part of the introduction of the Health Diversion Programme, is providing €100,000 in 2020 to develop a national harm reduction campaign to raise awareness of the risks associated with drug use.

I am committed to a public health approach to drug use, as it will lead to better outcomes for individuals and society. At the same time, we cannot be complacent about the risk to health posed by illegal drugs, including cannabis.

Alcohol Pricing

1102. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health when he will introduce minimum unit pricing for the purchase of alcohol; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15139/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Programme for Government commits to introducing the Minimum Unit Pricing of alcohol products.

The 2013 Government Decision which approved a minimum unit pricing regime envisaged its introduction in Northern Ireland and in this jurisdiction simultaneously in order to allay concerns about an impact on cross-border trade. I look forward to engagement and cooperation with the Northern Ireland administration so that we can both deliver on this important public health measure as soon as possible.

General Practitioner Services

1103. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the status of the provision of a service (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15154/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

Medical Aids and Appliances

1104. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health if funding can be provided to a person (details supplied) in order to purchase devices; if the exceptional medical circumstances in this case will be taken into account; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15159/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Appointments Status

1105. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if the case of a person (details supplied) will be prioritised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15174/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I am conscious that waiting times are often unacceptably long and of the burden that this places on patients and their families.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most elective scheduled care activity in line with the advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work.

The decision to delay appointments and admissions is not undertaken lightly and when such a decision is made, it is based on the safe delivery of care to all patients. The trajectory of the disease means there is now an opportunity for increasing the provision of non-covid care including more routine care. In this context Children's Health Ireland (CHI) is now re-establishing services on an incremental basis.

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 line with this policy, the clinical prioritisation of patients is the responsibility of the treating Consultant.

My Department has been made aware of the specific patient query raised. Children's Health Ireland (CHI) have advised the Department that the hospital remains in constant contact with the patient's family to provide updates and advice.

General Practitioner Services

1106. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the reason the provision of a treatment (details supplied) at general practitioner clinics is not covered under the GMS scheme or the long-term illness scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15178/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In May 2019, agreement was reached with the IMO on a major package of GP contractual reforms and service developments which will benefit patients and general practitioners.

Under this agreement and since the beginning of 2020 GPs are paid by the HSE to provide venesection for GMS patients with haemochromatosis. This means that GMS patients with this condition can now be managed locally by their GP and no longer have to attend hospitals for therapeutic phlebotomy.

Question No. 1107 answered with Question No. 974.

Hospital Waiting Lists

1108. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting for a procedure (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15190/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to pause all most elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and in accordance with World Health Organisation guidelines, and the National Action Plan.

The trajectory of the disease means there is now an opportunity for increasing the provision of non-covid care including more routine care. NPHE has since revised its recommendation on the pausing of all non-essential health services, with a recommendation that the 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.

Where possible, hospitals are working to find innovative ways to enable service provision, which include virtual clinics for some outpatient 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>).

To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, the HSE launched its Strategic Framework for 'Service Continuity in a Covid Environment' on 24 June. Its implementation will ensure service resumption is done in an integrated way. This will involve a phased approach to ensure community services are strengthened. The Framework will also consolidate new ways of working and build on international knowledge. The HSE is currently developing a Service Continuity Roadmap for the resumption of services across the health system.

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 data requested concerning the tonsils surgery waiting list is outlined in the attached document.

[Table - tonsils surgery waiting list]

HSE Correspondence

1109. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health if he will instruct HSE West to issue a reply in respect of a query that was raised (details supplied). [15192/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): 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

As the Deputy's question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

HSE Data

1110. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the contracts in place with taxi companies in County Waterford; the duration of the contracts; if the contracts were extended; the tendering processes involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15197/20]

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

Covid-19 Tests

1111. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health when his attention was drawn to private hospitals charging for Covid-19 tests prior to treatment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15200/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy will be aware, I do not have any responsibility for private hospitals, including in relation to charges that they apply.

An arrangement was agreed with the private hospitals earlier in the year to use their facilities as part of the public system on a temporary basis, to provide essential services in anticipation of additional demand on public hospital services. Under the arrangement, all patients in private hospitals were treated as public patients while the agreement was in place. On review, the Government decided that the existing arrangement should not be extended beyond the end of June, and on 1st July 2020 all private hospitals reverted to private activity. The Department of Health does not have a role in the operational functions of private hospitals.

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More broadly in relation to testing, the HSE has developed guidance for the management of planned hospital admissions for non-COVID care which sets out advisory testing strategies for hospital patients. This guidance seeks to provide an advisory framework for mitigating risks associated with the delivery of non-COVID care while COVID-19 continues to be prevalent, and testing provides one of a number of measures that can be taken to reduce risk.

As with any procedure or test, there will be a cost. I am not in a position to comment on what the actual cost may be in private hospitals, however, I understand that the costs arising from testing for COVID-19 in public hospitals is much lower than the upper charges quoted by the Deputy.

In addition, I can confirm that the NTPF have advised my Department that no patient is liable for any charge from a private hospital for services arranged by the NTPF.

Hospital Procedures

1112. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if he has made contact with Cork University Maternity Hospital on the lifting of visiting restrictions for designated birthing partners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15201/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service issue, I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply to you directly.

Disability Services Funding

1113. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health when a letter will be issued to disability service providers to confirm that the 1% cut earmarked in the 2020 HSE service plan no longer applies further to comments made by his predecessor in Dáil Éireann on 11 June 2020 in respect of funding for disability service providers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15203/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy will be aware, the Government has agreed to allocate substantial additional funding to the Health Vote to meet the costs associated with the implementation of the measures outlined in the National Action Plan in response to COVID-19.

In this context, the HSE Executive Management Team has agreed a structured approach to addressing the financial challenges of Section 39 Agencies due to COVID-19. This includes many organisations who provide specialist disability services to both adults and children.

The objective of the programme is to provide a structured governance process and modus operandi through which Section 39 partners experiencing financial difficulties due to the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (PHE) can engage through the HSE to ensure, where appropriate, continuity of essential services provided by these agencies. The HSE has also developed a methodology to provide a pro forma approach to support decision making in respect of Section 39 Organisations that have made submissions to the HSE for both financial & non-financial supports during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, the HSE has advised the Department that it has given Section 38 and Section 39 providers of disability services and supports assurance that budget allocations confirmed to each provider via the relevant Community Healthcare Organisation, will remain in place to year end, subject to co-operation with the HSE and compliance with the relevant Service Arrange-

ments.

The HSE and all of the providers it funds are expected to continually review their cost structures to ensure the best use of resources and a focus on the use of these resources for client care to the greatest extent possible. The very significant additional financial resources provided to disability services over the last year, together with the achievement of relatively modest efficiency savings, form part of the financing of the increased service levels set out in the National Service Plan 2020. It was intended that these efficiencies would be achieved in 2020 through the application of a 1% efficiency target to existing budgets across all service areas.

My Department supports the HSE in seeking efficiencies across all its spending areas. However, it is acknowledged that there will be challenges in achieving the 1% efficiency saving given the significant pressures on the disability sector in the context of COVID-19.

Covid-19 Tests

1114. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding insurance coverage for Covid-19 tests for patients to access services in private hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15211/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy will be aware, I do not have responsibility for private hospitals, including in relation to charges that they apply. Neither do I have a role, as Minister for Health, in the commercial decisions taken by any health insurer regarding the treatments or services provided in their products, provided that the regulatory obligations set out in Minimum Benefit regulations and other health insurance legislation are complied with.

In relation to testing, the HSE has developed guidance for the management of planned hospital admissions for non-COVID care which sets out advisory testing strategies for hospital patients. This guidance seeks to provide an advisory framework for mitigating risks associated with the delivery of non-COVID care while COVID-19 continues to be prevalent, and testing provides one of a number of measures that can be taken to reduce risk.

As with any procedure or test, there will be a cost. I am not in a position to comment on what the actual cost may be in private hospitals, however, I understand that the costs arising from testing for COVID-19 in public hospitals is much lower than the upper charges referenced in recent media coverage. In addition, I can confirm that the NTPF have advised my Department that no patient is liable for any charge from a private hospital for services arranged by the NTPF.

Medical Cards

1115. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding changes to the over 70s medical card income threshold; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15218/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Bill 2020 was published on 1 July. This Bill provides, amongst other things, for the necessary legislative amendments to increase the weekly gross medical card income limits for those aged 70 and over to €550 per week for a single person (currently €500 per week) and to €1,050 for a couple (currently €900 per week).

The Bill is expected to proceed through the Houses of the Oireachtas in mid-July.

Health Information and Quality Authority

1116. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if he will order an independent investigation into the circumstances of a death in a nursing home (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15224/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Since 2009 the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, is the statutory independent regulator in place for the nursing home sector, whether a HSE managed or a private nursing home. The Authority, established under the Health Act 2007, has significant and wide-ranging powers up to and including withdrawing the registration of a nursing home facility, which means that it can no longer operate as a service provider.

This responsibility is underpinned by a comprehensive quality framework comprising of Registration Regulations, Care and Welfare Regulations and National Quality Standards.

HIQA in discharging its duties determines, through examination of all information available to it, including site inspections, whether a nursing homes meets the regulations in order to achieve and maintain its registration status. Should a nursing home be deemed to be non-compliant with the Regulations and the National Quality Standards, it may either fail to achieve or lose its registration status. In addition, the Chief Inspector has wide discretion in deciding whether to impose conditions of Registration on nursing homes.

During the response to COVID-19, Nursing homes continue to be regulated by HIQA, who under the Health Act 2007 have the legal authority to examine the operation of any facility under their remit.

In relation to this particular nursing home, I can confirm that my Department has received correspondence in relation to the matter raised by the Deputy and has forwarded on details to HIQA as the statutory regulator for nursing homes, and the HSE for appropriate action and follow up.

Question No. 1117 answered with Question No. 1019.

Medicinal Products

1118. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health when a review of hATTR amyloidosis treatment funding will commence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15228/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drugs schemes, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013. The Act specifies the criteria for decisions on the reimbursement of medicines.

In line with the 2013 Act and the national framework agreed with industry, a company must submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the reimbursement list.

Reimbursement is for licensed indications which have been granted market authorisation by the European Medicines Agency or the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are made on objective, scientific and economic grounds, on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics

(NCPE).

The NCPE conducts health technology assessments (HTAs) for the HSE and makes recommendations on reimbursement to assist HSE decisions. The NCPE uses a decision framework to systematically assess whether a drug is cost-effective as a health intervention.

I am advised by the HSE that it has received an application for the reimbursement of Patisirán (Onpattro®) for the treatment of hereditary transthyretin-mediated amyloidosis (hATTR amyloidosis) in adult patients with stage 1 or stage 2 polyneuropathy.

In January 2019, a full health technology assessment was commissioned by the HSE. This assessment was completed in February 2020 with the NCPE recommending that patisirán (Onpattro®) is not considered for reimbursement unless cost-effectiveness can be improved relative to existing treatments.

The HTA report will be an important input into the decision making processes of the HSE. The HSE is currently reviewing the report received and has recently met with the applicant company to discuss this.

Once negotiations between the HSE and the applicant company are complete, this application must then be formally considered by the HSE Drugs Group. The HSE Drugs Group is the national committee which the HSE has in place to make recommendations on the pricing and reimbursement of medicines. The decision making authority in the HSE is the HSE Executive Management Team.

Disability Services Provision

1119. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if assistance will be offered to persons (details supplied) regarding the urgent need for an expansion in adult disability services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15241/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): 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.

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.

Dental Services

1120. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of an orthodontics appointment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15242/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Waiting Lists

1121. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a medical procedure for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15251/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I am conscious that waiting times are often unacceptably long and of the burden that this places on patients and their families.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most elective scheduled care activity in line with the advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work.

The decision to delay appointments and admissions is not undertaken lightly and when such a decision is made, it is based on the safe delivery of care to all patients. The trajectory of the disease means there is now an opportunity for increasing the provision of non-covid care including more routine care. In this context Children's Health Ireland (CHI) is now re-establishing services on an incremental basis.

Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

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

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

Hospital Waiting Lists

1122. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a medical procedure for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15252/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I am conscious that waiting times are often unacceptably long and of the burden that this places on patients and their families.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer all most elective scheduled care activity in line with the advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work.

The decision to delay appointments and admissions is not undertaken lightly and when such a decision is made, it is based on the safe delivery of care to all patients. The trajectory of the disease means there is now an opportunity for increasing the provision of non-covid care including more routine care. In this context Children's Health Ireland (CHI) is now re-establishing services on an incremental basis.

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 line with this policy, the clinical prioritisation of patients is the responsibility of the treating Consultant.

My Department has been made aware of the specific patient query raised. Children's Health Ireland (CHI) have advised the Department that the hospital remains in constant contact with the patient's family to provide updates and advice.

Hospital Services

1123. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the timeline for the reopening of St. Brigid's Hospital, Carrick-on-Suir, for respite and palliative care services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15254/20]

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

Hospital Services

1124. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the long-term plan for St. Michael's Hospital following the investment of €700,000 as part of the Covid-19 response; if the hospital will now be reconsidered for the provision of urgently required mental health crisis beds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15255/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible in relation to this facility in Clonmel.

Hospital Staff

1125. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of consultants by specialist posts that are vacant in each hospital that is part of Dublin Midlands hospital group as of 1 July 2020; the length of time each post has been vacant; and the position regarding the filling of each post. [15270/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly on this matter.

Hospital Waiting Lists

1126. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on

the waiting list to see a consultant cardiologist at Naas General Hospital; and the average waiting time to see the consultant. [15271/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to pause all non-urgent elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) and in accordance with World Health Organisation guidelines, and the National Action Plan.

The trajectory of the disease means there is now an opportunity for increasing the provision of non-covid care including more routine care. NPHET has since revised its recommendation on the pausing of all non-essential health services, with a recommendation that the 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 NPHET Expert Advisory group will have operational implications, which will impact on throughput.

Where possible, hospitals are working to find innovative ways to enable service provision, which include virtual clinics for some outpatient 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>).

To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, the HSE launched its Strategic Framework for ‘Service Continuity in a Covid Environment’ on 24 June. Its implementation will ensure service resumption is done in an integrated way. This will involve a phased approach to ensure community services are strengthened. The Framework will also consolidate new ways of working and build on international knowledge. The HSE is currently developing a Service Continuity Roadmap for the resumption of services across the health system.

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 latest National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) figures show that there are 1,324 patients on the Naas General Hospital cardiology waiting list. The NTPF have advised my Department that the average waiting time is 354 days. The data requested concerning the Naas General Hospital cardiology waiting list is also outlined in the following document.

[Table - Naas General Hospital cardiology waiting list figures]

The NTPF currently collects and collates information in respect of the Inpatient, Day Case, Planned Procedure (IDPP*) and Outpatient (OP) Waiting Lists. The requested National waiting list data is available on the NTPF website, and is available by hospital site as well as specialty at (<https://www.ntpf.ie/home/nwld.html>).

Hospital Expenditure

1127. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the estimated full-year current and capital costs of extending the period the sleep clinic is available at Naas General Hospital from half a day per month to two full days per month. [15272/20]

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

Respite Care Services

1128. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if provisions will be put in place for those in need of respite care who are unable to access it due to public health advice. [15288/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): 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

1129. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of an appointment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15291/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I am conscious that waiting times are often unacceptably long and of the burden that this places on patients and their families.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most elective scheduled care activity in line with the advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work.

The decision to delay appointments and admissions is not undertaken lightly and when such a decision is made, it is based on the safe delivery of care to all patients. The trajectory of the disease means there is now an opportunity for increasing the provision of non-covid care including more routine care. In this context Children's Health Ireland (CHI) is now re-establishing services on an incremental basis.

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, was developed to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care. This policy, which has been adopted by the HSE, sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists.

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

Disability Services Provision

1130. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the specific timeline for the reopening of adult and child disability services, respectively; the additional supports that will be put in place to support those living with disabilities and their families who are experiencing extreme regression as a result of the closure of such services for months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15293/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 9 July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

The guidance document seeks to support the safe return of services in the context of ongoing public health guidance. It also recognises that the impact of public health guidance will result in services being provided at a reduced level and will require changes in how people are supported, increased use of technology where appropriate and more use of outreach supports.

Day services will gradually resume during the month of August. Service providers are already working to get day services ready to reopen safely, and in line with public health guidance. Service providers will be in touch with all families and service users during the month of July to discuss when they may expect the resumption of their service and what that service will consist of.

I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that this will be the first step towards returning to some sense of normalcy.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: www.hse.ie/newdirections. The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, the latest leaflet “Adult Disability Day Services and COVID-19 - What’s Happening? July 2020” is available at the above link.

With regard to specific service locations, service providers can provide this information directly. As the Deputy’s question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Services

1131. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health his plans to deliver access to 24-7 cardiac care at University Hospital Waterford, UHW; and if he will make a statement on

the matter. [15294/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In 2016, the Herity Report concluded that the needs of the effective catchment population of University Hospital Waterford (UHW) could be accommodated from a single cath lab and recommended that the operating hours of the existing cath lab should be extended.

The HSE has advised that an additional Consultant Interventional Cardiologist post to support a seven (7) day; 8 am – 8 pm service in the existing Cath Lab was advertised by the Public Appointment Service on 27 September 2019. Interviews for this position took place on 27 January 2020, the post is now at the final stages of recruitment through the Public Appointment Services and it is expected that it will be filled very soon.

The Programme For Government commits to the delivery of a second cath lab in University Hospital Waterford. As set out in the HSE's options appraisal, the preferred option is for a second cath lab and associated 12 bed day ward (delivering six additional beds) on the roof of the existing Cardiology Department, which will operate five days per week and provide diagnostic services only.

The HSE has advised that funding was allocated in the 2019 Capital Plan for the provision of second cath lab at University Hospital Waterford, planning permission was received from Waterford City and County Council in January 2020. Applications for fire and disability certification are currently in progress. Preparation of contract documentation has commenced and contractor selection is underway. Works and schedules were delayed due to COVID-19, but it is now anticipated that the project will go to tender in late August/early September.

The Herity Report also recommended that the current 9 to 5 provision of emergency pPCI services should cease to allow the hospital focus on the much larger volume of planned work. The then Minister for Health asked the Department to address the implications of this recommendation by arranging for a National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services.

The National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services commenced in January 2018 under the Chairmanship of Professor Phillip Nolan and a Steering Group was formed from nominations from interested stakeholders representing medical, professional/technical staff, nursing and patient representatives.

The aim of this Review is to achieve optimal patient outcomes at population level with particular emphasis on the safety, quality and sustainability of the services that patients receive by establishing the need for an optimal configuration of a national adult cardiac service.

While it is hoped that the National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services can be completed in the near future so that decisions can be made with regard to the continued investment and upgrading of Specialist Cardiac Services in Ireland, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has, unfortunately, had an adverse impact on its progress.

Primary Care Centres

1132. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the way in which a community in County Kerry would apply for a new primary care centre in its area; the points of contact within his Department and the HSE to initiate the process; the models of delivery and criteria for recent primary care centre developments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15301/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

Departmental Expenditure

1133. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health the amount of funding allocated to the production of television programmes (details supplied); the subhead in the accounts from which the sums were allocated; if there was a tendering process; if so, the details and costs involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15304/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): There was no funding allocated to the production of the Ireland on Call and Operation Covid Nation television programmes.

Hospital Data

1134. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide a list of hospitals that act as mesh centres at which women who have been injured due to the use of mesh can see a specialist. [15316/20]

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

Hospital Data

1135. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide a list of hospitals that have the necessary scanning facilities to detect mesh implants in women who have been injured due to the use of mesh. [15317/20]

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

Medicinal Products

1136. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health if approval will be given to the immunotherapy drug osimertinib; if a timeline can be provided for its availability for lung cancer patients; and if not, the reason. [15318/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drugs schemes, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

In line with the 2013 Act and the national framework agreed with industry, a company must submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the reimbursement list.

Reimbursement is for licensed indications which have been granted market authorisation by the European Medicines Agency or the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

In making a relevant reimbursement decision, the HSE is required under the Act to have re-

gard to a number of criteria including the health needs of the public, cost effectiveness, potential or actual budget impact and efficacy.

I can confirm that the HSE has approved the application for reimbursement of Osimertinib (Tagrisso) for non small cell lung cancer, the specific recommendation is for second-line use for the treatment of adult patients with locally advanced or metastatic EGFR T790M mutation-positive non small cell lung cancer.

I am advised by the HSE that reimbursement commenced from 1st July 2020.

Data Protection

1137. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he will conduct a full audit of all data transferred with or without consent to a company (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15326/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Minister for Health does not have the power to carry out audits of personal data flows between data controllers. Under GDPR, all data controllers need to regularly audit their holdings of personal data and the procedures they have in place to protect the data in order to ensure compliance with data protection law. External auditing of data controllers is a matter for the Data Protection Commission to decide upon and to undertake.

Data Protection

1138. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if brain tumour data from Beaumont Hospital have been transferred to a company (details supplied) before the extended opt-out deadline; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15327/20]

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

Hospital Charges

1139. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the provision being made to waive the accident and emergency charge for public patients during the Covid-19 pandemic in circumstances in which a patient has had no other option to attend accident and emergency for care due to restricted access to other care options; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15348/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health (Out-Patient Charges) Regulations 2019 provides that, subject to certain exemptions, a charge shall be made for out-patient services provided at designated centres including an emergency department (€100) and a minor injury unit (€75). These exemptions include a person with a medical card, a person who has a letter of referral from a registered medical practitioner, a person receiving services for the diagnosis or treatment of an infectious disease prescribes under part IV of the Health

On the 20th February 2020, the Minister for Health signed the 'Infectious Diseases (Amendment) Regulations 2020' to include Covid-19 on the list of notifiable infectious diseases. As a consequence, a person receiving services for the diagnosis or treatment of Covid-19 is exempt

from the statutory €100 Emergency Department (and €75 Minor Injury Unit) charge.

I have no plans to amend the provisions in relation to the application of this charge.

Disability Services Provision

1140. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the status of the effectiveness of the HSE framework for the resumption of adult disability day services; if he will obtain feedback from user groups such as a group (details supplied) to hold the HSE accountable for the satisfactory outcome of its plan; and the way in which the State can better support the thousands of carers and their loved ones who are now facing stress and frustration while the adult disability day services are not fully resumed. [15352/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 9 July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

The guidance document seeks to support the safe return of services in the context of ongoing public health guidance. It also recognises that the impact of public health guidance will result in services being provided at a reduced level and will require changes in how people are supported, increased use of technology where appropriate and more use of outreach supports.

Day services will gradually resume during the month of August. Service providers are already working to get day services ready to reopen safely, and in line with public health guidance. Service providers will be in touch with all families and service users during the month of July to discuss when they may expect the resumption of their service and what that service will consist of.

I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that this will be the first step towards returning to some sense of normalcy.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: www.hse.ie/newdirections. The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, the latest leaflet “Adult Disability Day Services and COVID-19 - What’s Happening? July 2020” is available at the above link.

Hospital Data

1141. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health the number of isolation beds operational and available at South Tipperary General Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15353/20]

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

Hospital Data

1142. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health the staffing budget for South Tipperary General Hospital in each of the years 2016 to 2020, inclusive, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15354/20]

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

Covid-19 Tests

1143. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if he will clarify the situation for private patients who, despite paying for health insurance, are being charged for Covid-19 testing on top of their healthcare. [15360/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy will be aware, I do not have responsibility for private hospitals, including in relation to charges that they apply. Neither do I have a role, as Minister for Health, in the commercial decisions taken by any health insurer regarding the treatments or services provided in their products, provided that the regulatory obligations set out in Minimum Benefit regulations and other health insurance legislation are complied with.

In relation to testing, the HSE has developed guidance for the management of planned hospital admissions for non-COVID care which sets out advisory testing strategies for hospital patients. This guidance seeks to provide an advisory framework for mitigating risks associated with the delivery of non-COVID care while COVID-19 continues to be prevalent, and testing provides one of a number of measures that can be taken to reduce risk.

As with any procedure or test, there will be a cost. I am not in a position to comment on what the actual cost may be in private hospitals, however, I understand that the costs arising from testing for COVID-19 in public hospitals is much lower than the upper charges referenced in recent media coverage. In addition, I can confirm that the NTPF have advised my Department that no patient is liable for any charge from a private hospital for services arranged by the NTPF.

Disability Services Data

1144. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health the average waiting time for access to the early intervention teams covering Dublin 9 and 11; and if plans will be put in place to increase the capacity of the teams to meet the growing demand for the service. [15365/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): 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 ser-

VICES they choose, and enhance their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives

As the Deputy's question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

National Children's Hospital

1145. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health when construction work will recommence on the national children's hospital, if works have stalled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15376/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The NPHDB has statutory responsibility for planning, designing, building and equipping the new children's hospital and I have referred your question to the NPHDB for direct reply.

Hospital Funding

1146. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the reason funding to develop a new endoscopy wing at Cavan General Hospital by the RCSI hospital group has not been allocated to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15380/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

Departmental Schemes

1147. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the steps being taken to replace the travel schemes ceased in 2013 due to incompatibility with the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2018; if an alternative scheme is available; the status of the interdepartmental group requested to develop detailed proposals including eligibility criteria and administrative arrangements; the number of times the group met; when the last meeting took place; the outcome of the group; the findings of the report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15384/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Two schemes, the Mobility Allowance and Motorised Transport Grant, were put in place in 1979 and 1968 respectively, for operation by the Health Service Executive (HSE) at a time when there was limited availability of accessible public transport. The Government decided to close these administrative schemes in 2013, on foot of the reports of the Ombudsman in 2011 and 2012 regarding the legal status of both Schemes in the context of the Equal Status Acts.

On foot of the 2013 recommendations of the Interdepartmental Group, which was chaired by the Department of An Taoiseach, the Government decided that the Minister for Health, in consultation with other relevant Ministers, would progress preparatory work for a new statutory scheme to provide individual payments to people with severe disabilities who require additional income to address the costs of their mobility needs. The Interdepartmental Group met eight times between June and September that year.

In 2013, the Government also decided to continue payment of the monthly Mobility Allow-

ance on an interim basis, to those who were in receipt of the Mobility Allowance at the time that the Scheme closed. Of the 4,700 individuals in receipt of the Mobility Allowance (€9 million per annum) when the Scheme closed in 2013, there were 3,831 people in receipt of the interim payments at July 2019.

Other transport supports available to persons with disabilities in the State include the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers scheme, operated by the Revenue Commissioners; the Free Travel Scheme operated by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection; and CLÁR funding, approved by the then Minister for Rural and Community Development, to voluntary organisations providing transport for people with significant mobility issues.

At the whole of Government level, the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 sets the overall framework for the equal participation of people with disabilities in society. Monitoring of the implementation of the Strategy is being overseen by the National Disability Inclusion Strategy Steering Group which comprises key Government Departments, the National Disability Authority and the Disability Stakeholders Group.

Under the Strategy, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport has responsibility for the continued development of accessibility and availability of accessible public transport and is committed to the continued development of accessible public transport in recognition of the importance of such services to the lives of people with disabilities.

Recent developments which will impact on policy options regarding the provision of transport supports for people with a disability include the following:

- The ongoing progress by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in providing accessible public transport nationally and that Department's public consultation launched on 14 November last, to review active travel and public transport policy, including accessible public transport;

- The Cost of Disability Study currently underway which was commissioned by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection as part of Budget 2019. The research, when complete, will inform policy direction in relation to the provision of adequate supports to meet the needs of people with disabilities, including transport costs; and

- The Working Group established under Action 104 of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy by the Department of Justice and Equality which states that:- "We will lead a review of transport supports encompassing all Government funded transport and mobility schemes for people with disabilities, to enhance the options for transport to work or employment supports for people with disabilities and will develop proposals for development of a coordinated plan for such provision. This plan will have regard to making the most efficient use of available transport resources."

Hospital Funding

1148. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the allocations of substantial funding in excess €1 million allocated to hospitals (details supplied) in the RCSI hospital group over the past 20 years in tabular form; the year in which funds were allocated; the works for which funds were allocated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15387/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the matter raised by the Deputy is a service delivery matter, I have referred the question to the HSE for direct reply.

Ambulance Service

1149. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health the ambulance coverage by county and main towns within each county in tabular form. [15390/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply to you directly.

Health Information and Quality Authority

1150. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if an investigation will be undertaken into the death of an elderly person in a nursing home (details supplied); if so, if the adequacy of the response of the State agencies will be included in the investigation; and if private nursing homes will be included in the health service [15392/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Since 2009 the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, is the statutory independent regulator in place for the nursing home sector, whether a HSE managed or a private nursing home. The Authority, established under the Health Act 2007, has significant and wide-ranging powers up to and including withdrawing the registration of a nursing home facility, which means that it can no longer operate as a service provider.

This responsibility is underpinned by a comprehensive quality framework comprising of Registration Regulations, Care and Welfare Regulations and National Quality Standards.

HIQA in discharging its duties determines, through examination of all information available to it, including site inspections, whether a nursing homes meets the regulations in order to achieve and maintain its registration status. Should a nursing home be deemed to be non-compliant with the Regulations and the National Quality Standards, it may either fail to achieve or lose its registration status. In addition, the Chief Inspector has wide discretion in deciding whether to impose conditions of Registration on nursing homes.

During the response to COVID-19, Nursing homes continue to be regulated by HIQA, who under the Health Act 2007 have the legal authority to examine the operation of any facility under their remit.

Furthermore on foot of a National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) recommendation, on 23 May a COVID-19 Expert Panel on Nursing Homes was established, to examine the complex issues surrounding the management of COVID-19 among this particularly vulnerable cohort.

The purpose of the Panel is to examine the national and international responses to the COVID-19 crisis, and to examine the emerging best practice. Its main objective is to provide immediate real-time learnings and recommendations in light of the expected ongoing impact of COVID-19 over the next 12-18 months. COVID-19 is a new disease, which can present atypically in the frail elderly, and new evidence and best practice in its management are constantly emerging. I expect the Expert Panel to submit their final report to me later this month.

In relation to this particular nursing home, I can confirm that my Department has received correspondence in relation to the matter raised by the Deputy and has forwarded on details to HIQA as the statutory regulator for nursing homes, and the HSE for appropriate action and follow up.

Medical Cards

1151. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health when legislation necessary to implement changes to the medical card weekly income limit for persons over 70 years of age announced in budget 2020 will be brought forward in view of the fact the current situation means that couples with a combined weekly income of between €900 and €1,050 are losing out on their entitlement to a medical card; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15421/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Bill 2020 was published on 1 July. This Bill provides, amongst other things, for the necessary legislative amendments to increase the weekly gross medical card income limits for those aged 70 and over to €550 per week for a single person (currently €500 per week) and to €1,050 for a couple (currently €900 per week).

The Bill is expected to proceed through the Houses of the Oireachtas in mid-July.

Disability Services Provision

1152. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if assistance will be offered to a person (details supplied) in relation to the urgent need for an expansion in adult disability services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15422/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): 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.

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.

Abortion Services Provision

1153. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health the number of terminations of pregnancies that were carried out in each hospital providing the service from 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2019, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15425/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy will be aware, under section 20 (1) of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018, a notification of each termination of pregnancy carried out under the legislation must be notified to the Minister for Health within 28 days of it being carried out.

The notifications are recorded on the form entitled "Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 (Notifications) Regulations 2018" (Statutory Instrument No. 597 of 2018). The following information is included in the form:

- Medical Council registration number of the medical practitioner who carried out the termination of pregnancy;

- The section of the Act under which the termination was carried out, i.e., section 9, 10, 11 or 12;

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- Medical Council registration number(s) of the medical practitioner(s) who made the certification concerned;

- The county of residence, or place of residence (where the woman resides outside of the State) of the woman concerned;

- The date on which the termination of pregnancy was carried out.

No other information is notified to the Minister. This includes information on the number of terminations of pregnancy carried out by each hospital providing the service in a given year.

The Annual Report on Notifications 2019 was published on 30 June 2020 and is available on the Department of Health's website

Question No. 1154 answered with Question No. 1071.

Hospital Appointments Status

1155. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health if an appointment will be expedited for a person (details supplied). [15430/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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 pause all non-urgent elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and in accordance with the World Health Organisation, and the National Action Plan. The trajectory of the disease means there is now an opportunity for increasing the provision of non-covid care including more routine care.

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.

Disability Services Provision

1156. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health when full day-time services for persons with disabilities of all ages will be restored. [15431/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 9 July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

The guidance document seeks to support the safe return of services in the context of ongoing public health guidance. It also recognises that the impact of public health guidance will result in services being provided at a reduced level and will require changes in how people are supported, increased use of technology where appropriate and more use of outreach supports.

Day services will gradually resume during the month of August. Service providers are already working to get day services ready to reopen safely, and in line with public health guidance. Service providers will be in touch with all families and service users during the month of July to discuss when they may expect the resumption of their service and what that service will consist of.

I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that this will be the first step towards returning to some sense of normalcy.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: www.hse.ie/newdirections. The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, the latest leaflet “Adult Disability Day Services and COVID-19 - What’s Happening? July 2020” is available at the above link.

Regarding services more widely, including children’s services, the HSE and its partner service providers are endeavouring to maintain essential support services during this unprecedented public health emergency. HSE Community Healthcare Organisations (CHOs) are continuing to proactively engage with disability service providers to ensure that appropriate contingency arrangements are made so that the necessary supports are put in place for persons with disabilities and their families. In the absence of regular access to some service and supports, CHOs and service providers tried to maintain services that can be delivered safely; providing outreach and telecare solutions, using technology where possible; and using creative and innovative models of care to support service users, both adults and children.

The HSE is very aware of the impact of the pandemic on people with disabilities, their families and carers and have over the past few weeks developed a number of working groups to plan and develop guidance on how we will be able to deliver supports, albeit in a new way and under the Public Health guidance.

In this regard and whilst accepting that very significant levels of vital therapies have been temporarily curtailed, it is important to emphasise that the HSE is now in the process of detailed planning in order to recover these services in line with the Governments' Roadmap. It is important to note that this must be supported by way of assurance and oversight from the HSE's Chief Clinical Officer along with the National Public Health Emergency Team, so that we can do so in a safe manner. This means that therapies, whilst being delivered in new ways, will gradually be re-introduced to children with disabilities.

Health Information and Quality Authority

1157. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health if requests to investigate allegations of ill treatment in a nursing home (details supplied) have been received; if the matter is being investigated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15433/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Since 2009 the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, is the statutory independent regulator in place for the nursing home sector, whether a HSE managed or a private nursing home. The Authority, established under the Health Act 2007, has significant and wide-ranging powers up to and including withdrawing the registration of a nursing home facility, which means that it can no longer operate as a service provider.

This responsibility is underpinned by a comprehensive quality framework comprising of Registration Regulations, Care and Welfare Regulations and National Quality Standards.

HIQA in discharging its duties determines, through examination of all information available to it, including site inspections, whether a nursing home meets the regulations in order to achieve and maintain its registration status.

Should a nursing home be deemed to be non-compliant with the Regulations and the National Quality Standards, it may either fail to achieve or lose its registration status. In addition, the Chief Inspector has wide discretion in deciding whether to impose conditions of registration on nursing homes.

During the response to COVID-19, Nursing homes continue to be regulated by HIQA, who under the Health Act 2007 have the legal authority to examine the operation of any facility under their remit.

While HIQA does not investigate individual complaints about a health or social care service under the Health Act 2007, all information received (solicited and unsolicited) is reviewed and risk assessed. Information is then used in a number of ways to establish if a service is safe, effective, caring, and well managed. All information pertinent to individual nursing homes, or information which might indicate a risk to residents, is addressed with providers on a case-by-case basis.

I would urge that anyone that is aware of an individual case or cases of concern that they should be brought to the attention of HIQA and were relevant the HSE.

Hospital Data

1158. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the inpatient and outpatient wait times in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to date in 2020 by speciality, hospital group and by zero to six months, six to 12 months, 12 to 18 months, 18 months to two years, two to

three years, three to four years and four years or more, respectively, in tabular form. [15437/20]

1239. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the details of the outpatient waiting list at University Hospital Waterford by speciality; the wait time periods of zero to three, three to six, six to nine, nine to 12, 12 to 15, 15 to 18 and greater than 18 months, respectively, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15605/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1158 and 1239 together.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to pause all non-urgent elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and in accordance with World Health Organisation guidelines, and the National Action Plan.

The trajectory of the disease means there is now an opportunity for increasing the provision of non-covid care including more routine care. NPHE has since revised its recommendation on the pausing of all non-essential health services, with a recommendation that the 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.

Where possible, hospitals are working to find innovative ways to enable service provision, which include virtual clinics for some outpatient 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>).

To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, the HSE launched its Strategic Framework for 'Service Continuity in a Covid Environment' on 24 June. Its implementation will ensure service resumption is done in an integrated way. This will involve a phased approach to ensure community services are strengthened. The Framework will also consolidate new ways of working and build on international knowledge. The HSE is currently developing a Service Continuity Roadmap for the resumption of services across the health system.

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 NTPF currently collects and collates information in respect of the Inpatient, Day Case, Planned Procedure (IDPP*) and Outpatient (OP) Waiting Lists. National waiting lists data by hospital site and by specialty is published by the NTPF on their website (<https://www.ntpf.ie/home/nwld.htm>.) and is publically available.

The end of year waiting lists for IPDC and OPD from 2016 until 2019, and for June 2020 is outlined in the attached documents. Data requested in regard to UHW is also attached.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumenta-

Question No. 1159 answered with Question No. 1047.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1160. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of staff hired by the HSE to assist in combating Covid-19 by job field and hospital group in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15439/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Health Screening Programmes

1161. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients screened as part of BreastCheck from 1 January to 1 June in each of the years 2018 to 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15440/20]

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

Health Screening Programmes

1162. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients screened as part of bowel screening from 1 January to 1 June in each of the years 2018 to 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15441/20]

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

Health Screening Programmes

1163. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients screened as part of CervicalCheck from 1 January to 1 June in each of the years 2018 to 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15442/20]

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

Health Screening Programmes

1164. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients screened as part of diabetic retina screening from 1 January to 1 June in each of the years 2018 to 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15443/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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

1165. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of additional beds made available in acute hospitals to help combat Covid-19 by hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15444/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Department of Health is working with the HSE to increase acute capacity in hospitals throughout the country. In the context of the current COVID-19 Pandemic response, the HSE advised on 22 June 2020 that an additional 324 acute beds have opened since March, bringing the current total of acute beds in the system to 11,597 excluding critical care capacity. It should be noted that this is the total current bed capacity. However, beds are unavailable when they are temporarily closed for reasons such as infection control, maintenance/refurbishment, or staffing shortages.

The HSE's Critical Care Programme Census from September 2019 reported that there were 255 adult critical care beds in public hospitals. At an early stage of the Covid-19 pandemic, additional funding was provided to the HSE to increase the number of critical care beds. 42 critical care beds have been funded since March in addition to the baseline critical care capacity already identified in hospitals.

In line with the HSE's Critical Care Major Surge Preparedness Planning Framework, surge plans for further capacity for each Hospital Group have been developed in order to create additional capacity if required.

In relation to the Deputy's request for a breakdown by site, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

Health Information and Quality Authority

1166. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the powers of HIQA regarding private nursing homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15445/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Since 2009 the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, is the statutory independent regulator in place for the nursing home sector, whether a HSE managed or a private nursing home. The Authority, established under the Health Act 2007, has significant and wide-ranging powers up to and including withdrawing the registration of a nursing home facility, which means that it can no longer operate as a service provider.

This responsibility is underpinned by a comprehensive quality framework comprising of Registration Regulations, Care and Welfare Regulations and National Quality Standards.

HIQA makes judgments on whether the registered provider or person-in-charge is: compliant, substantially compliant or not compliant with the regulations associated with the findings.

- Compliant means the provider and or the person-in-charge is in full compliance with the relevant regulation.

- Substantially compliant means that the provider or person-in-charge has generally met the requirements of the regulation but some action is required to be fully compliant. This finding will have a low risk-rating.

- Not compliant means the provider or person-in-charge has failed to comply with a regula-

tion and that considerable action is required to reach compliance.

Continued non-compliance or where the non-compliance poses a significant risk to the safety, health and welfare of residents will be given a high risk-rating. In such cases, HIQA will set a deadline for the provider to comply with the regulation.

Where the non-compliance does not pose a significant risk to the safety, health and welfare of residents using the service, it is risk-rated moderate and the provider must reach compliance within a reasonable time frame.

HIQA identifies that the regulatory actions taken where a registered provider is non-compliant are proportionate to the risks identified.

The non-statutory options the Chief Inspector employs include:

- Increased regulatory activity;
- Issuing compliance plans following inspections (setting out the non-compliances and requiring a provider to submit how they intend to comply);
- Seek assurance from the provider;
- Provider meetings (including both cautionary and warning);
- Warning letters.

The Statutory powers in the Act that can be employed include:

- Seeking information under section 65 of the Act;
- Attaching, vary and removing a condition of registration under Section 51 of the Act;
- Cancelling of registration under section 51 of the Act;
- Urgent action under section 59 of the Act (to attach, vary or remove a condition of registration or cancellation of registration);
- Prosecution for an offence under the Act.

The functions and powers of the Chief Inspector are set out in Parts 7, 8 and 9 of the Health Act 2007 (as amended). HIQA has prepared a Regulation Handbook which is a guide for providers and staff of designated centres. This is available on the Authority's website.

Health Information and Quality Authority

1167. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his plans regarding the case of a person (details supplied). [15446/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Since 2009 the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, is the statutory independent regulator in place for the nursing home sector, whether a HSE managed or a private nursing home. The Authority, established under the Health Act 2007, has significant and wide-ranging powers up to and including withdrawing the registration of a nursing home facility, which means that it can no longer operate as a service provider.

This responsibility is underpinned by a comprehensive quality framework comprising of

Registration Regulations, Care and Welfare Regulations and National Quality Standards.

HIQA in discharging its duties determines, through examination of all information available to it, including site inspections, whether a nursing home meets the regulations in order to achieve and maintain its registration status. Should a nursing home be deemed to be non-compliant with the Regulations and the National Quality Standards, it may either fail to achieve or lose its registration status. In addition, the Chief Inspector has wide discretion in deciding whether to impose conditions of Registration on nursing homes.

During the response to COVID-19, Nursing homes continue to be regulated by HIQA, who under the Health Act 2007 have the legal authority to examine the operation of any facility under their remit.

In relation to this particular nursing home, I can confirm that my Department has received correspondence in relation to the matter raised by the Deputy and has forwarded on details to HIQA as the statutory regulator for nursing homes, and the HSE for appropriate action and follow up.

Hospital Data

1168. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of vacant beds in the public health system by hospital in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15447/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

Dental Services

1169. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the waiting lists for dentistry and orthodontic services disaggregated by region in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15448/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Data

1170. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of new beds made available to date in 2020 and planned for the remainder of the year disaggregated by hospital group and hospital in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15449/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, commits to continuing investment in our health care services in line with the recommendations of the Health Service Capacity Review and the commitments in Project Ireland 2040.

The Capacity Review found that the net requirement, in a reform scenario, is for an additional 2,590 hospital beds by 2031 (inpatient, day case, critical care) with an immediate requirement for 1,290 beds to address overcrowding and to ensure hospitals operated at 85%

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occupancy in line with other OECD countries. Approximately 770 of these beds have been provided. The National Development Plan provides for the addition of the full 2,590 beds by the earlier date of 2027.

In relation to the particular query raised regarding additional beds provided in 2020, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

Hospital Data

1171. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of new beds made available in 2018 and 2019 disaggregated by hospital group and hospital in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15450/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health Service Capacity Review found that the net requirement, in a reform scenario, is for an additional 2,590 hospital beds by 2031 (inpatient, day case, critical care) with an immediate requirement for 1,290 beds to address overcrowding and to ensure hospitals operated at 85% occupancy in line with other OECD countries. Approximately 770 of these beds have been provided. The National Development Plan provides for the full 2,590 beds by the earlier date of 2027.

In relation to the particular query raised regarding additional beds provided in 2018 and 2019, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

Hospital Staff

1172. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of whole-time equivalent consultant psychiatrists working in the mental health unit in Waterford in each of the years 2018 and 2019 and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15451/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): 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 Commission

1173. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his views on the most recent report of the Mental Health Commission; the actions that will be taken; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15452/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The Mental Health Commission's Annual Report for 2019 was launched on 2 July.

I welcome this report as it provides an important independent insight into where the mental health system is performing well and where improvement is required.

Some of the issues raised by the Commission will be addressed by the recently launched national mental health policy, Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy for Everyone. This policy makes recommendations on service access, coordination and continuity of care, social inclusion, accountability and continuous improvement, among others. In addition, the review of

the 2001 Mental Health Act, on which work is ongoing, will help to put in place a more robust framework in which mental health services can be delivered.

While I am pleased that there has been an overall improvement in regulatory compliance in recent years, it is clear that further improvement is needed. I will, with my Department, continue to work closely with both the Commission and the HSE to ensure that issues highlighted in this Annual Report are addressed.

Hospital Facilities

1174. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the timetable for the construction and delivery of the second cath lab at University Hospital Waterford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15453/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Estates unit in the Health Service Executive has been tasked with the delivery of additional capacity (infrastructure and equipment) nationwide in the effort for the containment and prevention of the spread of the Coronavirus - COVID-19. This has resulted in delays to works and schedules.

Funding has been allocated in the Capital Plan for the provision of 2nd Cath Lab at University Hospital Waterford. Planning Permission is in place for this project and applications for fire and disability certification are currently in progress. It is anticipated the project will go to tender in late August / early September – subject to approval. As required by OGP, tender is a 2 stage process for Main and Specialist contractors. This process will take approximately 4 months.

At present the draft Capital Plan 2020 is being reviewed and revised to take account of the impact of Covid-19 which resulted in delays on many projects and the funding of an emergency Covid-19 programme of works. Once the HSE has finalised its Capital Plan for 2020, it will then be submitted to me for consideration.

Hospital Services

1175. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his plans with regard to the provision of 24-7 emergency cardiac care at the primary percutaneous coronary intervention, PCI, centre in Waterford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15454/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In 2016, the Herity Report concluded that the needs of the effective catchment population of University Hospital Waterford (UHW) could be accommodated from a single cath lab and recommended that the operating hours of the existing cath lab should be extended.

The HSE has advised that an additional Consultant Interventional Cardiologist post to support a seven (7) day; 8 am – 8 pm service in the existing Cath Lab was advertised by the Public Appointment Service on 27 September 2019. Interviews for this position took place on 27 January 2020, the post is now at the final stages of recruitment through the Public Appointment Services and it is expected that it will be filled very soon.

The Programme For Government commits to the delivery of a second cath lab in University Hospital Waterford. As set out in the HSE's options appraisal, the preferred option is for a second cath lab and associated 12 bed day ward (delivering six additional beds) on the roof of the existing Cardiology Department, which will operate five days per week and provide diagnostic services only.

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The HSE has advised that funding was allocated in the 2019 Capital Plan for the provision of second cath lab at University Hospital Waterford, planning permission was received from Waterford City and County Council in January 2020. Applications for fire and disability certification are currently in progress. Preparation of contract documentation has commenced and contractor selection is underway. Works and schedules were delayed due to COVID-19, but it is now anticipated that the project will go to tender in late August/early September.

The Herity Report also recommended that the current 9 to 5 provision of emergency pPCI services should cease to allow the hospital focus on the much larger volume of planned work. The then Minister for Health asked the Department to address the implications of this recommendation by arranging for a National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services.

The National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services commenced in January 2018 under the Chairmanship of Professor Phillip Nolan and a Steering Group was formed from nominations from interested stakeholders representing medical, professional/technical staff, nursing and patient representatives.

The aim of this Review is to achieve optimal patient outcomes at population level with particular emphasis on the safety, quality and sustainability of the services that patients receive by establishing the need for an optimal configuration of a national adult cardiac service.

While it is hoped that the National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services can be completed in the near future so that decisions can be made with regard to the continued investment and upgrading of Specialist Cardiac Services in Ireland, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has, unfortunately, had an adverse impact on its progression.

Mental Health Services

1176. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 556 of 30 June 2020, when the national guidelines will be published (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15460/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I am advised that the HSE is currently engaged in detailed operational planning across the primary and community sector that will underpin the phased resumption of community services over the period ahead. This work will align with the recently published document “Service Continuity in a COVID Environment – A Strategic Framework for Delivery” which is available on the HSE’s website at <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/service-continuity-in-a-covid-environment-a-strategic-framework-for-delivery.pdf>.

HSE Data

1177. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health the number of day centres in Galway city and county that have closed since mid-March 2020 as result of Covid-19; the location of and service provided by each centre; the number of users deprived of services as a result of the closures; the analysis undertaken by HSE community healthcare west in regard to the closures and the impact on users; if he will provide a copy of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15464/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): 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

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.

Drug and Alcohol Task Forces

1178. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the restoration of funding for an organisation (details supplied); if the funding will be restored ahead of the proposed Clonburris development; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15466/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Medical Cards

1179. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health the revised income limits due to come into force in July 2020 for medical cards; and if the HSE is now processing applications under these new guidelines. [15468/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Bill 2020 was published on 1 July. This Bill provides, amongst other things, for the necessary legislative amendments to increase the weekly gross medical card income limits for those aged 70 and over to €550 per week for a single person (currently €500 per week) and to €1,050 for a couple (currently €900 per week).

The Bill is expected to proceed through the Houses of the Oireachtas in mid-July.

Dental Services

1180. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health if he will examine the possibility of restoring free dental benefits, namely, a free clean and polish, for the over-70s. [15475/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS) provides dental treatments to medical card holders. Services currently available annually include an examination, two fillings and emergency extractions. Other more complex care is also provided, some of which requires prior approval by a Principal Dental Surgeon. Patients with special needs and high risk patients can avail of a broader range of treatments. This includes free scale and polish for those who are considered to be at high risk.

Smile agus Sláinte, the National Oral Health Policy, published in April 2019, includes proposals for the introduction of packages of oral healthcare for adult medical card holders at different intervals during their life course. The packages will focus on prevention and will include examinations, advice, and preventive therapies such as scale and polish. The timeframe for the delivery of the Policy is up to 2026 and the roll-out of these packages of care will take place incrementally over the next number of years. Routine care including fillings and complex care will continue to be available.

Hospital Car Parks

1181. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his views on the abolition of car parking charges at public hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15478/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Programme for Government makes a commitment to introduce a cap on the maximum daily charge for patients and visitors at all public hospitals, where possible and to introduce flexible passes in all public hospitals for patients and their families.

This issue has been under active consideration in recent years. The HSE conducted a review of hospital car parking charges and submitted their report to the Department of Health in December 2018. My Department and the HSE are currently engaging on this issue in order to achieve this new Programme for Government commitment.

National Children's Hospital

1182. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the timeline for the construction of the national children's hospital; the estimated cost; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15479/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The NPHDB has statutory responsibility for planning, designing, building and equipping the new children's hospital and I have referred your question to the NPHDB for direct reply.

Question No. 1183 answered with Question No. 1042.

Health Screening Programmes

1184. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his views on the expansion of neonatal screening; the action he will take in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15482/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The National Screening Advisory Committee (NSAC) was established in 2019 and has held two meetings to date. The Committee's role is to undertake an independent assessment of the evidence for screening for a particular condition against internationally accepted criteria and make recommendations accordingly.

Professor Niall O'Higgins was appointed as Chair of the NSAC in 2019 and was asked that the Committee prioritise an examination of the approaches for the expansion of the National Newborn Bloodspot Screening Programme ('heelprick test') and work in that regard has been progressed by the Committee.

It is most likely that over the course of the next 5 years we are likely to see an incremental expansion of the bloodspot programme that will screen for new conditions.

The next meeting is scheduled to take place on 17 July 2020 where the Committee will consider (1) the addition of ADA-SCID to the blood spot screening programme and (2) a change in the screening pathway of the Diabetic RetinaScreen programme.

Any future potential changes to the National Newborn Bloodspot Screening Programme will be incorporated as part of the Committee's work programme. Updates in relation to the

work of the Committee will be posted on the NSAC website available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/nsac/>.

General Practitioner Services

1185. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his plans to extend free general practitioner care for children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15483/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): On 25 June, the Government gave approval for the publication of the Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Bill 2020. This Bill provides, amongst other things, for the phased expansion of GP care without fees to all children aged 12 years and under. The Bill was published on July 01, 2020 and it is expected to proceed through the Houses of the Oireachtas in mid-July.

The initial stage of this phased expansion will be the provision of GP care without fees to all children aged between 6 and 8. I am currently reviewing the situation in relation to this expansion to determine how and when this expanded service can be introduced in a way which will meet the ongoing health needs of children and will also be sustainable for General Practice in the current COVID environment.

Dental Services

1186. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his plans to extend free dental care for children; the timeline to deliver this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15484/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Public Dental Service of the HSE treats children up to 16, and persons of all ages with special needs, through its dental clinics. All HSE dental clinics prioritise emergency care for children up to 16, treatment for special needs patients and screening of children aged from 11 to 13 years, including referral for orthodontic services where necessary.

Smile agus Sláinte, the National Oral Health, which was published in April 2019 supports a preventive approach to oral healthcare. It includes proposals for the introduction of packages of care for children from birth to 16 years of age to be delivered by contracted local dental practices and preventive packages of care to be made available for all eligible adults at different intervals during their life course.

The timeframe for the delivery of the Policy is 2019 to 2026 and the roll-out of these packages of care will take place incrementally. An early priority of the new Policy was the roll-out of packages of care for children under 6 in 2020, however, this has been delayed because of the necessary concentration of resources at managing the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Health Services Staff

1187. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his plans to hire additional dentists, orthodontists and dental nurses in the public system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15485/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Smile agus Sláinte, the new National

Oral Health Policy provides the groundwork to transform oral health services over the next eight years. The community oral healthcare services will centre on vulnerable and special care support services, as well as on needs assessment for people in residential settings and others who require additional supports.

The Policy recognises the need for a suitably skilled workforce to provide appropriate oral healthcare across all settings. This workforce will include oral healthcare professionals providing the highest level of care in advanced oral healthcare centres or in secondary/tertiary care centres, as well as oral healthcare professionals providing oral healthcare advice and preventive care directly to the public in primary oral healthcare settings. A protected educational, training and research environment will be a priority for the implementation of the Policy.

The detail of workforce requirements will be agreed as part of the implementation process. At present it remains difficult to quantify what the public health sector's future workforce requirements will be, as we are still in the process of managing the current COVID-19 crisis. Once the full impact of the pandemic is understood, the service requirements and available resources will determine the extent to which recruitment may be required.

Dental Services

1188. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the wait times for orthodontic treatment by region and wait time of zero to one, one to two, two to three, three to four and more than four years, respectively in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15486/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

General Practitioner Services

1189. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of general practitioners employed in each primary care centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15487/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Health Service Executive has responsibility for the provision and operation of Primary Care Centres, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

Health Screening Programmes

1190. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his plans to fully implement the recommendations of the Scally report and, specifically, actions and time frames to deliver it; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15488/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The implementation plan for the recommendations of the Scally inquiry was approved by Government on 11 December 2018. The implementation plan contains 170 actions. At the end of Q1 2020, 137 of the 170 identified actions were completed.

I fully support the full implementation of the recommendations of Dr Scally and am com-

mitted to publishing a quarterly progress report against the recommendations on the Department of Health website. There has been significant progress by all parties to date and my Department engages on an ongoing basis with the HSE and the National Cancer Registry to oversee implementation of the recommendations.

Given the challenges that have arisen due to the COVID-19 pandemic some of the remaining work on the implementation of the recommendations has not been progressed. The HSE are currently developing capacity planning for the ongoing delivery of COVID-19 and non COVID-19 care and services side by side. Work on implementing the remaining recommendations will be re-prioritised in line with this process.

Medicinal Products

1191. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his views on an independent inquiry into the use of sodium valproate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15489/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have previously gone on record as stating that I would support an inquiry into the use of sodium valproate in this country. On 8 July, the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review in the UK published its report into sodium valproate and two other medical interventions. I have asked officials in my Department, as well as in the HSE and the Health Products Regulatory Authority, to consider the findings of this report and provide me with comprehensive briefing before I consider the next steps in addressing the issue of sodium valproate use in Ireland.

Home Help Service

1192. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his plan to increase home support hours; the number of increased hours he plans to deliver over the lifetime of the Government; if he has a target for each year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15490/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): COVID-19 is posing significant challenges for many areas of our Older People Services, including Home Support Services. In light of these unprecedented challenges, the HSE, at the outset, had to reassess its operation of Home Support Services nationally, to ensure that the assessed needs of those clients with the highest priority were and still are being met. The HSE, working with its approved home support service providers are endeavouring to maintain essential support services during this unprecedented public health emergency. In this context, the HSE has set out a prioritisation process for home support, which looks at delivering a service based on priority need across 4 priority categories.

As a result of that review of prioritisation, a number of clients with lower priority needs had their home support service temporarily ceased or reduced with the support of family members and/or alternative forms of volunteer provided local supports. In these cases, each client was contacted to advise of the assessment and decision, alternative support available and assistance given to ensure that essential requirements continue to be provided. The HSE continues to review both those clients whose home support service may have been temporarily suspended and those clients of higher priority currently in receipt of home support services.

The HSE is in the process of restoring services, where capacity exists. In order to maximise the capacity available, consideration has to be given to balancing delivery of service against

suspended clients, clients assessed and waiting on commencement of home support services and the continued requirement to meet the needs of higher priority clients currently in receipt of services.

Having regard to broader public finances, I am committed to prioritising continued investment in the home support services. COVID-19 has shown that these services are needed now, more than ever, to keep people safe and well in their own homes.

The level of funding available for the Department of Health in 2021, and future years, and the quantum of services to be provided by the HSE, including home support will be considered as part of the annual national Estimates and budgetary process and National Service Planning.

Question No. 1193 answered with Question No. 1072.

Departmental Schemes

1194. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the status of progress on the proposed transport support scheme that is due to replace the mobility allowance and the motorised transport grant, which both ceased to exist in February 2013; when the scheme will be finalised; if he plans to work with the Departments of Communications, Climate Action and Environment and Transport, Tourism and Sport to finalise the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15494/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Two schemes, the Mobility Allowance and Motorised Transport Grant, were put in place in 1979 and 1968 respectively, for operation by the Health Service Executive (HSE) at a time when there was limited availability of accessible public transport. The Government decided to close these administrative schemes in 2013, on foot of the reports of the Ombudsman in 2011 and 2012 regarding the legal status of both Schemes in the context of the Equal Status Acts.

On foot of the 2013 recommendations of the Interdepartmental Group, which was chaired by the Department of An Taoiseach, the Government decided that the Minister for Health, in consultation with other relevant Ministers, would progress preparatory work for a new statutory scheme to provide individual payments to people with severe disabilities who require additional income to address the costs of their mobility needs. The Interdepartmental Group met eight times between June and September that year.

In 2013, the Government also decided to continue payment of the monthly Mobility Allowance on an interim basis, to those who were in receipt of the Mobility Allowance at the time that the Scheme closed. Of the 4,700 individuals in receipt of the Mobility Allowance (€9 million per annum) when the Scheme closed in 2013, there were 3,831 people in receipt of the interim payments at July 2019.

Other transport supports available to persons with disabilities in the State include the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers scheme, operated by the Revenue Commissioners; the Free Travel Scheme operated by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection; and CLÁR funding, approved by the then Minister for Rural and Community Development, to voluntary organisations providing transport for people with significant mobility issues.

At the whole of Government level, the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 sets the overall framework for the equal participation of people with disabilities in society. Monitoring of the implementation of the Strategy is being overseen by the National Disability Inclusion Strategy Steering Group which comprises key Government Departments, the Na-

tional Disability Authority and the Disability Stakeholders Group.

Under the Strategy, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport has responsibility for the continued development of accessibility and availability of accessible public transport and is committed to the continued development of accessible public transport in recognition of the importance of such services to the lives of people with disabilities.

Recent developments which will impact on policy options regarding the provision of transport supports for people with a disability include the following:

The ongoing progress by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in providing accessible public transport nationally and that Department's public consultation launched on 14 November last, to review active travel and public transport policy, including accessible public transport;

The Cost of Disability Study currently underway which was commissioned by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection as part of Budget 2019. The research, when complete, will inform policy direction in relation to the provision of adequate supports to meet the needs of people with disabilities, including transport costs; and

The Working Group established under Action 104 of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy by the Department of Justice and Equality which states that:- "We will lead a review of transport supports encompassing all Government funded transport and mobility schemes for people with disabilities, to enhance the options for transport to work or employment supports for people with disabilities and will develop proposals for development of a coordinated plan for such provision. This plan will have regard to making the most efficient use of available transport resources."

Health Services Staff

1195. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of active pathologists in light of the fact that there has been a shortage of pathologists in some regions, with post-mortem procedures taking up to five days in some counties; if there was planning for an increased demand on pathologists due to Covid-19; if there is provision for increased counselling and bereavement services for families due to secondary trauma arising from deaths due to Covid-19 and the delay in carrying out post-mortems; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15498/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): There are currently 270 Consultant Histopathologists employed across the HSE.

In preparation for the impact of COVID-19, my Department worked with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government which established a COVID-19 Excess Mortality National Oversight Group. A plan was developed by this inter-agency group to guide the implementation of an effective and appropriate national system for managing mortality, informed by the need for compassion and care for the families affected.

Key membership of this group included the HSE, the Office of the State Pathologist, the Coroner Service and the Faculty of Pathology, to ensure issues arising with post-mortem and funeral services were addressed to minimise the impact of deaths on families.

My Department and the HSE worked with the Department of Justice and the Coroner Service to minimise any delays for families associated with post-mortem requirements. Following

these discussions, the HSE advise that there has been a significant reduction in delays associated with post-mortems in hospitals.

The HSE put in place a range of additional initiatives across hospitals to ensure end of life care in response to COVID-19. This included developing special visiting passes for relatives to visit dying family members, enabling virtual visiting services and ensuring access to appropriate chaplaincy support for patients.

The HSE is co-ordinating a comprehensive psychosocial response to address the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and to support the overall wellbeing, resilience and mental health of our population.

To provide additional bereavement support, the HSE in conjunction with Irish Hospice Foundation has established a National Bereavement Support Line which is operational 5 days a week. Information on this line has been made available through a variety of channels including radio adverts, HSE and IHF websites and distributed to all hospitals, nursing homes and long stay facilities.

HSE Properties

1196. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding and status of a property (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15500/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the management of the public healthcare property estate, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to you in relation to this matter.

Disability Services Provision

1197. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Health his plans and timelines prepared to ensure that day services for adults with disabilities can resume on a full-time basis, in view of the caring burden that closures and reduced hours have placed on parents and families that must now return to work as the economy reopens; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15505/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 9 July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

The guidance document seeks to support the safe return of services in the context of ongoing public health guidance. It also recognises that the impact of public health guidance will

result in services being provided at a reduced level and will require changes in how people are supported, increased use of technology where appropriate and more use of outreach supports.

Day services will gradually resume during the month of August. Service providers are already working to get day services ready to reopen safely, and in line with public health guidance. Service providers will be in touch with all families and service users during the month of July to discuss when they may expect the resumption of their service and what that service will consist of.

I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that this will be the first step towards returning to some sense of normalcy.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: www.hse.ie/newdirections. The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, the latest leaflet "Adult Disability Day Services and COVID-19 - What's Happening? July 2020" is available at the above link.

Hospital Waiting Lists

1198. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health if overdue surgery will be expedited for a child (details supplied). [15522/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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 pause all non-urgent elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and in accordance with the World Health Organisation, and the National Action Plan. The decision to delay appointments and admissions is not undertaken lightly and when such a decision is made, it is based on the safe delivery of care to all patients.

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.

National Children's Hospital

1199. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if building work is progressing on the new national children's hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15532/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The NPHDB has statutory responsibility for planning, designing, building and equipping the new children's hospital and I have referred your question to the NPHDB for direct reply.

Primary Care Services

1200. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in each LHO area waiting for a podiatry appointment in primary care at the end of June 2020 or the latest date available; and the number waiting zero to 12, 12 to 26, 26 to 52 and more than 52 weeks, respectively. [15540/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Primary Care Services

1201. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in each LHO area waiting for an ophthalmology appointment in primary care at the end of June 2020 or the latest date available; and the number waiting zero to 12, 12 to 26, 26 to 52 and more than 52 weeks, respectively. [15541/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Primary Care Services

1202. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in each LHO area waiting for an audiology appointment in primary care at the end of June 2020 or the latest date available; and the number waiting zero to 12, 12 to 26, 26 to 52 and more than 52 weeks, respectively. [15542/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Primary Care Services

1203. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in each LHO area waiting for a dietetics appointment in primary care at the end of June 2020 or the latest date available; and the number waiting zero to 12, 12 to 26, 26 to 52 and more than 52 weeks, respectively. [15543/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

Home Help Service

1204. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons with disabilities in receipt of home support hours in each LHO area at the end of June 2020 or the latest date available; the number on the waiting list for same in each LHO area; and the number waiting zero to three, three to six, six to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [15544/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): The HSE provides a range of assisted living services including Personal Assistant (PA) and Home Support services to support individuals to maximise their capacity to live full and independent lives. The Department of Health and HSE are committed to protecting the level of PA and Home Support Services available to persons with disabilities, in line with the National Service Plan. As part of its response to the unprecedented COVID19 crisis, the HSE has worked with service providers and developed a Contingency Plan to assist in the delivery of services where possible, and recognises that many new and innovative processes were developed to maintain different forms of service delivery during this crisis.

The Department of Health recognises that the programme for Government pledges to deliver increased home support and Personal Assistance hours, and notes that additional funding was allocated in the National Service Plan for 2020.

As the Deputy's question relates to a service issue, it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

Disability Services Data

1205. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons with disabilities in receipt of personal assistance hours in each LHO area at the end of June 2020 or the latest date available; the number on the waiting list for same in each LHO area; and the number waiting zero to three, three to six, six to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [15545/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): The Department of Health and HSE are committed to protecting the level of Personal Assistant (PA) and Home Support Services available to persons with disabilities, in line with the National Service Plan. As part of its response to the unprecedented COVID19 crisis, the HSE has worked with service providers and developed a Contingency Plan to assist in the delivery of services where possible, and recognises that many new and innovative processes were developed to maintain different forms of service delivery during this crisis.

The Department of Health recognises that the programme for Government pledges to deliver increased home support and Personal Assistance hours, and notes that additional funding was allocated in the National Service Plan for 2020.

As the Deputy's question relates to a service issue, it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

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Disability Services Data

1206. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of residential places for persons with a disability being provided at the end of June 2020 or the latest date available by CHO area in tabular form. [15546/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

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

Disability Services Data

1207. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of new emergency places provided to persons with a disability at the end of June 2020 by local health office area in tabular form. [15547/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

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.

Disabilities Assessments

1208. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of children at the end of June 2020 or the latest date available that were awaiting a first assessment from the HSE under the Disability Act 2005. [15548/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As the Deputy's question relates to a service issue, it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

HSE Waiting Lists

1209. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the physiotherapy waiting list in each local health area at the end of June 2020 or the latest date available; the number waiting less than four, four to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively; and the number in each category waiting aged zero to four, five to 17, 18 to 64 and 65 plus years of age, respectively, in tabular form. [15549/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

Speech and Language Therapy

1210. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the speech and language therapy assessment waiting list in each local health area at the end of June 2020 or the latest date available; the number waiting less than four, four to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively; and the number in each category waiting aged zero to four, five to 17, 18 to 64 and 65 plus years of age, respectively, in tabular form. [15550/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

Speech and Language Therapy

1211. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the speech and language therapy initial treatment waiting list in each local health area at the end of June 2020 or the latest date available; the number waiting less than four, four to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively; and the number in each category waiting aged zero to four, five to 17, 18 to 64 and 65 plus years of age, respectively in tabular form [15551/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As the Deputy's question relates to a service issue, it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

Speech and Language Therapy

1212. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the speech and language further treatment waiting list in each local health area at the end of June 2020 or the latest date available; the number waiting less than four, four to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively; and the number in each category waiting aged zero to four, five to 17, 18 to 64 and 65 plus years of age, respectively, in tabular form. [15552/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As the Deputy's question relates to a service issue, it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

Occupational Therapy

1213. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the occupational therapy first time assessment waiting list in each local health area at the end of June 2020 or the latest date available; the number waiting less than four, four to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively; and the number in each category waiting aged zero to four, five to 17, 18 to 64 and 65 plus years of age, respectively, in tabular form. [15553/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As the Deputy's question relates to a service issue, it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

Primary Care Services

1214. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in each

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LHO area waiting for a counselling appointment in primary care at the end of June 2020 or the latest date available; and the number waiting four to 12, 12 to 26, 26 to 52 and more than 52 weeks, respectively. [15554/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): 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

1215. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in each LHO area waiting for a child and adolescent mental health services appointment in primary care at the end of June 2020 or the latest date available; and the number waiting four to 12, 12 to 26, 26 to 52 and more than 52 weeks, respectively. [15555/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): 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 Services

1216. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in each LHO area waiting for a psychology appointment in primary care at the end of June 2020 or the latest date available; and the number waiting zero to 12, 12 to 26, 26 to 52 and more than 52 weeks, respectively. [15556/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

1217. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of children admitted to adult mental health units to date in 2020. [15557/20]

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

Home Help Service

1218. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of home support hours being provided in each LHO area as of 1 July 2020 or the latest date available; the way in which this compares to target in each LHO for the same time period; the number of persons currently on the waiting list for home support hours in each LHO area; and the number waiting zero to three, three to six, six to 12 and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form. [15558/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As these are

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

Nursing Homes Support Scheme

1219. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons awaiting placement under the fair deal scheme as of 1 July 2020 or latest date available; the average waiting time; the number of persons awaiting placement under the scheme; and the length of time waiting. [15559/20]

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

Question No. 1220 answered with Question No. 1011.

Medicinal Products

1221. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if he will fully implement the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health recommendations on sodium valproate and foetal anti-convulsant syndrome; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15562/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): On 8 July, the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review in the UK published its report into sodium valproate and two other medical interventions. I have asked officials in my Department, as well as in the HSE and the Health Products Regulatory Authority, to consider the findings of this report and provide me with comprehensive briefing before I consider the next steps in addressing the issue of sodium valproate use in Ireland. This will include consideration of the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Health.

Question No. 1222 answered with Question No. 1011.

Question No. 1223 answered with Question No. 1071.

Home Help Service

1224. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the lack of equality of treatment in respect of home help being funded by the HSE to persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15578/20]

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

Food Safety Authority of Ireland

1225. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Health if he will intervene in a funding

dispute between the Food Safety Authority of Ireland and his Department in view of the fact that the authority has indicated its funding from his Department is not sufficient to fund both it and the local authority veterinary service (details supplied). [15588/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) is the competent authority with overall responsibility for the enforcement of food safety legislation in Ireland. Responsibility for enforcement of food legislation is managed through service contracts between the FSAI and a number of competent authorities, also known as ‘Official Agencies’. These official agencies include the Health Service Executive (HSE); Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM); Local Authorities (LAs); and Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority.

The LAs’ service contract is provided by the Local Authority Veterinary Service (LAVS). LAs, acting on behalf of the FSAI, are responsible for food law enforcement required under EU food law at over 500 food businesses (including small meat manufacturing plants, slaughterhouses, cold stores, etc.).

In addition to food safety controls, the LAVS also carries out functions for other Government Departments, including overseeing the enforcement of animal health and welfare legislation at slaughterhouses, on-farm emergency slaughter and the verification of competence to slaughter by plant operatives. LAs also have statutory responsibility in relation to dog and horse control, dog licensing and the regulation of dog breeding establishments.

The annual funding provided by the Department of Health to the FSAI is inclusive of funding for the LAVS service contract. While funded by the Department, the FSAI is independent in the exercise of its functions. There have been a number of meetings between officials in my Department and the Authority regarding the FSAI budget, including the LAVS service contract.

I understand that due to financial pressures across the FSAI budget, FSAI had indicated to the LAs in early 2020 that it would not be in a position to provide the same amount this year that it had provided for LAVS in 2019. In early May 2020, my Department advised the FSAI that it has increased its non-capital funding for 2020 by 7.5% (an additional €1.2m), bringing its total annual non-capital allocation to €17.172m.

In recent weeks, FSAI advised the LAs through the County and City Management Association (CCMA) that it is now able to allocate funding to the LAs (in 2020) closer to the amount it provided in 2019. Furthermore, the FSAI has advised my Department that a three-month extension (until 30th September 2020) has been agreed between the FSAI and the LAs/CCMA on the present LAVS service contracts, which will allow FSAI to review the service with the aim of finding a longer-term solution with an appropriately funded and sustainable operational/service model. My Department will also seek engagement with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (DHPLG), the LAs’ parent Department.

The FSAI has advised my Department that it has, in recent years, provided the following funding to the LAs for the delivery of the Local Authority Veterinary Service:

- 2017: €6,030,266.62
- 2018: €6,229,317.08
- 2019: €6,199,697.21

1226. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding a person (details supplied); if the case will be dealt with in the near future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15589/20]

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

Health Services Provision

1227. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health the status of an application for residential care by a person (details supplied). [15591/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

As the Deputy's question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Data

1228. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the numbers of inpatient and day procedure beds in place at University Hospital Waterford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15594/20]

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

Hospital Data

1229. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the numbers of outpatient hospital cancellations for February, March, April and June 2020 by hospital and hospital group in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15595/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to pause most elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and in accordance with World Health Organisation guidelines, and the National Action Plan.

To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, the HSE launched its Strategic Framework for 'Service Continuity in a Covid Environment' on 24th June 2020. Its implementation will ensure service resumption is done in an integrated way. This will involve a phased approach to ensure community services are strengthened. The Framework will also consolidate new ways of working and build on international knowledge. The HSE is currently developing a Service Continuity Roadmap for the resumption of services across the health system. My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund

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are currently working together to evaluate the impact of Covid-19 on Scheduled Care waiting lists, in order to be prepared to address pent up demand.

In relation to the particular query raised concerning the number of outpatient hospital cancellations for February, March, April and June 2020 by hospital and hospital group in tabular form, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

Hospital Data

1230. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of outpatient hospital cancellations at University Hospital Waterford in each of the years 2018 and 2019 and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15596/20]

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

Emergency Departments

1231. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the emergency department attendances in acute hospitals in each of the years 2018 and 2019 and to date in 2020 by hospital and hospital group in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15597/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): There has been a growing demand for unscheduled care in recent years, with a significant increase in the number of patients attending our emergency departments. According to the ED PET database, over 1.3 million patients (1,352,256) attended at emergency departments in 2019, up 3% on the previous year (1,308,430). The 2020 year to date figures are subject to validation. Attendances at ED up to the end of May were provisionally reported at 445,608.

With regard to the specific information requested, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

Hospital Data

1232. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of public patients outsourced to private hospitals in each of the years 2018 and 2019 and to date in 2020 by hospital group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15598/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The information requested by the Deputy is currently being collated by officials in my Department and will be provided to the Deputy directly as soon as it becomes available.

Hospital Data

1233. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of public patients outsourced to private hospitals from University Hospital Waterford in each of the years 2018 and 2019 and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15599/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked

the Health Service Executive to respond to you directly as soon as possible.

Hospital Expenditure

1234. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the capital expenditure at University Hospital Waterford in each of the years 2018 and 2019 and to date in 2020; and the projects and timelines for completion in relation to uncompleted projects. [15600/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

HSE Agency Staff

1235. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the agency staff expenditure by acute hospital in each of the years 2018 and 2019 and to date in 2020 by month, hospital and hospital group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15601/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Hospital Facilities

1236. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the theatre capacity in place at University Hospital Waterford in each of the years 2018 and 2019 and to date in 2020; the theatres that are operational; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15602/20]

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

Hospital Funding

1237. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the closing budget and revenue expenditure for University Hospital Waterford in each of the years from 2007 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15603/20]

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

Hospital Staff

1238. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of whole-time equivalent radiographer posts at University Hospital Waterford in each of the years from 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15604/20]

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

Question No. 1239 answered with Question No. 1158.

Health Services Staff

1240. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of recruiting 15 additional dialectical behaviour therapy teams. [15616/20]

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

Medical Aids and Appliances

1241. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health if a hospital-style bed will be secured for a person (details supplied). [15617/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Palliative care, especially at end of life, plays an important role in the care of people with life-limiting or terminal illnesses. More than ever, attention is paid to not just physical pain, but to psychosocial and spiritual issues too. Palliative care also offers emotional support to both the patient and their families, addressing the fears they may have and giving comfort when necessary.

It is the Government's desire that all people will be provided with the type of palliative care services that they need, regardless of their diagnosis, their age or where they die.

While many people want, and are able, to die at home with support from their general practitioner and community specialist palliative care teams, it is accepted that others require support from an inpatient palliative care unit, or hospice. In north Dublin, St. Francis Hospice provides inpatient services at Blanchardstown and Raheny. Referral to the hospice is made by the GP, hospital doctor or consultant of the person with a life-limiting condition.

For those approaching death while living at home, the Irish Cancer Society and Irish Hospice Foundation operate the Night Nursing Service, an end-of-life nursing care programme. This can be used by people with a cancer or a non-malignant diagnosis. The Irish Cancer Society funds care for people with a cancer diagnosis, while the Irish Hospice Foundation funds care for those with a non-cancer diagnosis. The Service can be accessed through referral from the Specialist Community Palliative Care Team, Public Health Nurse, GP or hospital-based Specialist Palliative Care Team.

With regard to the Deputy's specific question, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to directly reply to the Deputy.

Disability Services Provision

1242. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health when a centre (details supplied) for adults with special education needs will reopen following closure due to the Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15621/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): 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.

As the Deputy's question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Funding

1243. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Health when funding already pledged for essential maintenance works at New Houghton Hospital, New Ross, County Wexford, will be made available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15623/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

Health Services Staff

1244. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Health when a response acknowledging receipt of a job application for a child psychologist for County Wexford will be furnished to the applicant; the reason there has been a three-month delay in acknowledging this application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15624/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly on this matter.

Disability Services Provision

1245. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Health when full disability services will resume in County Wexford for both adults and children; the additional supports being put in place for those regressing as a result of the closure of the services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15625/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 9 July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

The guidance document seeks to support the safe return of services in the context of ongo-

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ing public health guidance. It also recognises that the impact of public health guidance will result in services being provided at a reduced level and will require changes in how people are supported, increased use of technology where appropriate and more use of outreach supports.

Day services will gradually resume during the month of August. Service providers are already working to get day services ready to reopen safely, and in line with public health guidance. Service providers will be in touch with all families and service users during the month of July to discuss when they may expect the resumption of their service and what that service will consist of.

I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that this will be the first step towards returning to some sense of normalcy.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: www.hse.ie/newdirections. The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, the latest leaflet "Adult Disability Day Services and COVID-19 - What's Happening? July 2020" is available at the above link.

With regard to specific service locations, service providers can provide this information directly. 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. 1246 answered with Question No. 974.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1247. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if he will introduce legislation to make the wearing of face coverings on public transport obligatory; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15634/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): On 10 July 2020, I signed the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A – Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (Face Coverings on Public Transport) Regulations 2020 which provide for the wearing of face coverings on public transport. With effect from 13 July 2020, members of the public shall not, without reasonable excuse, travel by public transport without wearing a face covering.

Reasonable excuse includes where a person:

(1) cannot put one on, wear or remove a face covering because of any physical or mental illness, impairment or disability or without severe distress

(2) needs to communicate with another person who has difficulties communicating

(3) removes the face covering to provide emergency assistance or to provide care or assistance to a vulnerable person

(4) removes the face covering to take medication.

The Regulations do not apply to children under the age of 13.

Where a passenger is not wearing a face covering, a relevant person under the Regulations

may request the passenger to wear a face covering, refuse the passenger entry to the public transport vehicle, or may request the passenger to alight from the vehicle. A passenger must comply with a request to wear a face covering, a request to alight from a public transport vehicle or a refusal of entry. Failure to comply with a request to wear a face covering, a request to alight or refusal of entry is an offence.

Before exercising powers to request a passenger to wear a face covering, refuse entry to a public transport vehicle or request a passenger to alight from a public transport vehicle, a relevant person must give the passenger an opportunity to provide reasonable excuse and may request the passenger to provide information as the relevant person considers necessary to determine whether or not the passenger has reasonable excuse. The onus is on the passenger to establish to the satisfaction of the relevant person, that he or she has reasonable excuse.

Disability Services Provision

1248. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health when adult disability day services will reopen for those that urgently require these services in order that they do not regress further; if there will be a reduction in day services; when parents will be notified (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15639/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 9 July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

The guidance document seeks to support the safe return of services in the context of ongoing public health guidance. It also recognises that the impact of public health guidance will result in services being provided at a reduced level and will require changes in how people are supported, increased use of technology where appropriate and more use of outreach supports.

Day services will gradually resume during the month of August. Service providers are already working to get day services ready to reopen safely, and in line with public health guidance. Service providers will be in touch with all families and service users during the month of July to discuss when they may expect the resumption of their service and what that service will consist of.

I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that this will be the first step towards returning to some sense of normalcy.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: www.hse.ie/newdirections. The HSE have also

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issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, the latest leaflet “Adult Disability Day Services and COVID-19 - What’s Happening? July 2020” is available at the above link.

National Children’s Hospital

1249. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the works underway at the national children’s hospital; if none, when they will resume; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15640/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The NPHDB has statutory responsibility for planning, designing, building and equipping the new children’s hospital and I have referred your question to the NPHDB for direct reply.

Medical Cards

1250. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to situations in which persons in hospital who are being referred to general practitioners for blood tests are being charged accordingly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15641/20]

1251. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to situations in which persons in hospital with medical cards who are being referred to general practitioners for blood tests are being charged accordingly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15642/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1250 and 1251 together.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, hospital appointments and procedures were restricted as a public safety measure. The availability of appointments as well as visitor restrictions may vary between hospitals. Non-COVID services are now starting back gradually.

People who do not hold a medical card or GP visit card access GP services, including phlebotomy services, on a private basis. The fees charged by individual GPs for private consultations are a matter of private contract between clinicians and their patients.

Persons who are eligible for GP care without charge under the Health Act 1970 are not subject to any co-payments or other charges in respect of such services. There is no provision under the GMS GP contract for medical card or GP visit card holders to be charged for routine phlebotomy services provided by their GP which are required to either assist in the diagnosis of illness or the treatment of a condition and the HSE has advised GPs accordingly.

I am aware that, nonetheless, some GPs are charging GMS patients for phlebotomy services in some circumstances. The GP chronic disease management programme which is being phased in from this year will involve the ongoing monitoring of patients’ condition and any blood tests required in this context will be covered by the fees payable for this care.

However, it remains a matter of concern to me that a medical card or GP visit card patient might be charged for blood tests which are clinically necessary and I have asked my officials to discuss with the HSE what further solutions to this issue may be possible. If such a patient believes he or she has been incorrectly charged for routine phlebotomy services by his or her

GP, then that patient should report the matter to their HSE Local Health Office.

National Treatment Purchase Fund

1252. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will be assessed for surgery under the National Treatment Purchase Fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15660/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to pause most elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and in accordance with World Health Organisation guidelines, and the National Action Plan.

To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, the HSE launched its Strategic Framework for 'Service Continuity in a Covid Environment' on 24th June 2020. Its implementation will ensure service resumption is done in an integrated way. This will involve a phased approach to ensure community services are strengthened. The Framework will also consolidate new ways of working and build on international knowledge. The HSE is currently developing a Service Continuity Roadmap for the resumption of services across the health system. My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working together to evaluate the impact of Covid 19 on Scheduled Care waiting lists, in order to be prepared to address pent up demand.

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 is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 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.

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

Long-Term Illness Scheme

1253. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health if a device (details supplied) will be CE approved and available here under the long-term illness scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15677/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the HSE for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Primary Care Centres

1254. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the status of works and costs involved for a project (details supplied). [15678/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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

1255. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health if new Covid-19 guidelines will be sought regarding old folks' homes and residential care centres (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15679/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): It is recognised that the impact of COVID-19 on society in general and especially those living in long term residential care facilities has been considerable. Residential settings are people's homes as well as places where health and social care are provided. The introduction of physical distancing, isolation and restricted contact with family and loved ones has changed the usual dynamic of social interaction. During these times there has been a particular emphasis on retaining a holistic view of the wellbeing of residents, remaining person-centred, being cognisant of their rights as citizens, and being vigilant that in seeking to shield them from infection that these rights are not infringed upon in to an extent, or in a manner, that is disproportionate.

However, it is important to recall that people living in long-term residential care (LTRC) 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.

The actions and measures we have taken in Ireland to support long term residential care facilities and their residents 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 as well as focused specifically on residential facilities. Advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) focused on all LTRC settings and its recommended actions were relevant for all residential care services - older people, disability and mental health settings.

As the disease is becoming more suppressed in the community the National Public Health Emergency has advised that the gradual reintroduction of usual activities while taking public health precautions should commence. This advice is reflected in the latest Cocooning and visiting guidance. Detail of this guidance is set out by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre at: <https://www.hpsc.ie>.

The Department of Health is very much aware of how difficult the current restrictions on visiting are for residents and their families. Families are encouraged to talk to the support staff at the person's residence, to make arrangements for visits and other activities that can be facilitated within the current public health guidance. While it is appropriate in line with the public health cocooning guidance for activities outside the home to commence, it is important to balance the risk involved in prolonged periods of time outside the home. These risks will continue to be reviewed in line with the disease progression and guidelines will be updated.

Medical Waste Disposal

1256. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health his plans to introduce a national scheme for the proper disposal and or recycling of unused medicines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15694/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE have never organised a national ‘Disposal of Unused Medicines Properly’ campaign through Community Pharmacies.

As with any proposal that would have an impact on HSE expenditure, it would require it to be carefully considered in the context of available resources and scoped appropriately.

The HSE would anticipate that any future discussions with the Irish Pharmacy Union in relation to a nationwide approach to better medication management, would include appropriate disposal arrangements for unused medicines.

Health Screening Programmes

1257. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health if those women who donate breast milk for use by the health services are now required to undertake a blood test; if the cost of such blood tests are or will covered by the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15702/20]

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

Emergency Departments

1258. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health if he will commission an examination into the potential for restoring accident and emergency services at Monaghan hospital in view of the pressures evident at Cavan and Drogheda, particularly with Covid-19 restrictions remaining in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15703/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Monaghan Hospital and Cavan General Hospital operate as a single entity, with an integrated managerial and clinical governance system, care pathways and support functions. The Emergency Department is located at Cavan General Hospital, while the facilities at Monaghan Hospital are focused on elective care and the streaming of appropriate patients to the Minor Injuries Unit located on site.

Monaghan Hospital also continues to provide Theatre, Day Services, Diagnostic Services, Ambulatory Care and Out-Patient Services.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1259. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health if consideration has been given to appointing a representative from the Mental Health Commission onto the National Public Health Emergency Team expert group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15704/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy is no doubt aware, the NPHEM for COVID-19 is accountable to me as Minister for Health and is made up of senior public officials of the Department of Health and a number of relevant State Agencies, in addition to highly qualified subject matter experts from disciplines such as virology, infectious dis-

eases, intensive care etc. who are among the leading practitioners in their fields in this country.

The NPHEt can add to its membership on the basis of the additional expertise or support it identifies as being required so as to ensure that it is in the best possible position to provide advice and recommendations for consideration by the Minister for Health and the Government. These are the criteria on which the NPHEt identifies the requirement for particular expertise. This flexibility in approach to selection is necessary for a group such as this in the context of an international public health crisis of the kind we are currently experiencing due to the pandemic, and gives effect to Ireland's obligations to the WHO.

The NPHEt established the NPHEt Vulnerable Peoples Subgroup, which has broad membership from across Government Departments, Agencies and key stakeholders. The Subgroup was established to provide oversight and assurance with regard to the specific preparedness, measures and actions that need to be taken to protect vulnerable groups and individuals in society. The Subgroup includes a representative of the Mental Health Commission and ensures that the interests of people with mental health issues continue to be upheld during the COVID-19 emergency.

Medical Cards

1260. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health if a medical card application by a person (details supplied) will be reviewed. [15730/20]

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

Medical Waste Disposal

1261. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health if he will introduce a disposal of unused medicines properly, DUMP, scheme through local pharmacies (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15733/20]

1292. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if he will arrange for the HSE to put in place a national medicines recycling programme known as DUMP in accordance with the proposal made by a union (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15941/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1261 and 1292 together.

The HSE have never organised a national 'Disposal of Unused Medicines Properly' campaign through Community Pharmacies.

As with any proposal that would have an impact on HSE expenditure, it would require it to be carefully considered in the context of available resources and scoped appropriately.

The HSE would anticipate that any future discussions with the Irish Pharmacy Union in relation to a nationwide approach to better medication management, would include appropriate disposal arrangements for unused medicines.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1262. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health the status of reopening of private parks that contain playgrounds and other children and family play areas; the person or body that has the ultimate responsibility to ensure social distancing is adhered to in such incidences once reopened (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15734/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Since the Government confirmed the move to Phase 3 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business from Monday 29 June 2020, all remaining cultural, community, religious, social and sporting amenities and events were permitted to reopen. Public health information and advice about the lifting of these restrictions as part of Phase 3 along with the measures that are now in place are available on the Government website at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d06271-easing-the-covid-19-restrictions-on-29-june-phase-3/>.

As Minister for Health, I have no function in relation to the reopening of private parks as referred to by the Deputy or any other such private facilities.

The latest public health advice and guidance on Covid-19 related issues, including social distancing is available at the following link: <https://www2.hse.ie/coronavirus/>

Covid-19 Tests

1263. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that private hospitals are charging as much as €275 for Covid-19 testing before patients can access treatment; if this will be the case for patients referred under the NTPF; his views on whether this is appropriate in view of the fact that while these hospitals were in public hands patients were not previously charged for tests; his plans to cover the costs for testing for patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15779/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy will be aware, I do not have any responsibility for private hospitals, including in relation to charges that they apply.

An arrangement was agreed with the private hospitals earlier in the year to use their facilities as part of the public system on a temporary basis, to provide essential services in anticipation of additional demand on public hospital services. Under the arrangement, all patients in private hospitals were treated as public patients while the agreement was in place. On review, the Government decided that the existing arrangement should not be extended beyond the end of June, and on 1st July 2020 all private hospitals reverted to private activity. The Department of Health does not have a role in the operational functions of private hospitals.

More broadly in relation to testing, the HSE has developed guidance for the management of planned hospital admissions for non-COVID care which sets out advisory testing strategies for hospital patients. This guidance seeks to provide an advisory framework for mitigating risks associated with the delivery of non-COVID care while COVID-19 continues to be prevalent, and testing provides one of a number of measures that can be taken to reduce risk.

As with any procedure or test, there will be a cost. I am not in a position to comment on what the actual cost may be in private hospitals, however, I understand that the costs arising from testing for COVID-19 in public hospitals is much lower than the upper charges quoted by the Deputy.

In addition, I can confirm that the NTPF have advised my Department that no patient is liable for any charge from a private hospital for services arranged by the NTPF.

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Hospital Waiting Lists

1264. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health if a date for surgery will be provided for a person (details supplied). [15825/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to pause most elective scheduled care activity with effect from the end March 2020. 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 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and in accordance with World Health Organisation guidelines, and the National Action Plan.

To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, the HSE launched its Strategic Framework for 'Service Continuity in a Covid Environment' on 24th June 2020. Its implementation will ensure service resumption is done in an integrated way. This will involve a phased approach to ensure community services are strengthened. The Framework will also consolidate new ways of working and build on international knowledge. The HSE is currently developing a Service Continuity Roadmap for the resumption of services across the health system. My Department, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund are currently working together to evaluate the impact of Covid 19 on Scheduled Care waiting lists, in order to be prepared to address pent up demand.

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 is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 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.

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

Hospital Waiting Lists

1265. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if Beaumont Hospital has an internal waiting list to access a HSE diabetes pump application form; if patients have to wait for extended periods before the hospital submits the applications to the HSE; the reason for the internal application form waiting lists and submission delays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15839/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the matter raised by the Deputy is a service delivery matter, I have referred the question to the HSE for direct reply.

Home Help Service

1266. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if additional financial resources will be provided for home support in 2020 in view of the delays in providing these essential

supports for many eligible patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15849/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): The HSE provides a range of assisted living services including Personal Assistant (PA) and Home Support services to support individuals to maximise their capacity to live full and independent lives. These are related but separate services and each is funded separately. While the resources for the provision of assisted living services available are substantial they are finite. The 2020 national service plan allocated €1m additional funding to PA services.

PA and Home Support Services are provided either directly by the HSE or through a range of voluntary service providers. The majority of specialised disability provision (80%) is delivered through non-statutory sector service providers.

The presence and threat of COVID-19 in Ireland has resulted in significant challenges for service providers, families and most importantly, people with disabilities. During these challenging times disability services such as residential services, day services, home supports, Personal Assistant supports, respite services and children's services were either suspended or delivered in alternative ways following Public Health guidance. The changes in service delivery have resulted in significant stressors being placed on families and individuals with disabilities across Ireland. In times of such uncertainty it was imperative that the vulnerable members of our community remained supported by our service providers, therefore, it was essential that a shift in focus occurred in terms of how services were delivered.

One of the primary opportunities which has occurred as a result of the presence of COVID-19 has been that the pandemic has acted as a catalyst to the development of alternative models of service delivery. It is from this position that the reshaping process of services occur and consideration is given to how services will now be best delivered, mindful of the assessed individualised needs and wishes of people with disabilities and in accordance with Government Public Health guidelines. During this planning phase, there is a need to engage with individuals and, as appropriate, with their families, in reshaping what people with disabilities choose that their day should look like in order to have a meaningful life.

The Department of Health and HSE have agreed that the provision of Home Support services should be prioritised in order to maintain and support people to continue to live in their own homes and to provide support and help families and carers.

Considerations for reshaping Home Supports are as follows; Where home support hours were reduced due to COVID-19 public health requirements, a rigorous assessment of need including a risk assessment of infection control issues, must occur to determine what reshaping of supports should be delivered. Where a reassessment determines hours should be re-instated and can be delivered in accordance with public health guidance, this should occur. Where a reassessment determines hours are not to be reinstated for whatever reason, a meaningful conversation should be held with the individual and where appropriate with family, to identify what supports are most appropriate and what has been learned during the COVID-19 restrictions in terms of changing needs and wishes, resilience etc.

The Disability Sector is re-establishing a number of structures, as well as other operational structures, that will co-ordinate and support the sector as we continue to navigate this pandemic and make every effort to deliver home supports in line with Public Health Guidance.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1267. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health if downloads for the newly

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launched Covid-19 tracker application on phone models below iPhone 6S or Android 7 count towards total downloads. [15856/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Covid Tracker app uses the Exposure Notification System developed by Apple and Google to exchange anonymous IDs between phones. This update has been provided by Apple and Google to iPhone 6s and newer models and Android 6.0 devices. Google are working to make ENS available on earlier Android phones. We estimate that at the moment the ENS is available to about 92% of smart phone users. The symptom Check-in and information function of the app works on all android and iOS phones.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

1268. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the number of children on the waiting list for CAMHS in County Wexford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15867/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): 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

1269. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the number of children waiting for a CAMHS appointment in County Wexford at the end of quarter one of 2019 and quarter one of 2020, respectively, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15868/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): 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

1270. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the staffing levels in CAMHS in County Wexford by profession in each of the years 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15869/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): 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

1271. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health if there are vacancies in staffing in CAMHS in County Wexford; the length of time these vacancies have been for; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15870/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): 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

1272. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health if the CAMHS in County Wexford is operating at a seven days a week model; if not, when a seven day a week service is planned to be operational; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15871/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): 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

1273. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health his plans to provide a Jigsaw youth mental health service for County Wexford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15872/20]

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

Hospital Consultant Contracts

1274. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of retired consultants that were re-employed in the health service in the past year; the amount paid in respect of their salaries in the past year; the percentage of those employed under different contracts in tabular form; if each type of contract permits a split between public and private work; if so, the percentage allowed in each case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15873/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to reply directly to the Deputy with the data sought.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1275. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered the recommendation by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission that his Department should undertake a participative consultation process with it regarding the “Ethical Framework for Decision-Making in a Pandemic” document; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15874/20]

1282. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health if a participative consultation process will be undertaken with those most likely to be impacted by the guidance of his Department on prioritisation in access to critical care in the context of Covid-19, which explicitly engages human rights and equality expertise as recommended by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. [15923/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1275 and 1282 together.

The fields of human rights and healthcare ethics are distinct albeit they are inter-related. Human rights principles, in common with normative ethical principles are rooted in values of respect for persons, dignity, justice and equality.

Respect for human rights and dignity of persons is an integral part of the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In recognition of this, the Pandemic Ethics Advisory Group (PEAG) was established as an expert subgroup of the NPHET. The PEAG is multidisciplinary in composition and includes members from a broad range of relevant fields, including ethics, medicine, law and patient advocacy.

The subgroup has developed a broad range of national ethical guidance throughout the course of the Covid-19 pandemic with a view to supporting healthcare workers, managers and policy makers as they navigate their way through the ethical challenges and difficult decisions they are called upon to make during this challenging time. The Ethical Framework for Decision Making in a Pandemic and the supporting documents produced by PEAG clearly articulate the importance of fairness, inclusiveness, proportionality, and non-discrimination, all of which are enshrined Human Rights principles.

Given the volatility of the public health emergency and the urgent need for relevant guidance to be produced to address it, it was not feasible or appropriate to the circumstances to conduct an extensive consultation process when developing these guidance documents. However, they were reviewed by senior medical experts from a number of professional bodies including; the Joint Faculty of the Intensive Care Society of Ireland, the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, the College of Anaesthesiologists of Ireland, and the HSE's National Clinical Programmes.

The pandemic continues to evolve and the Ethics Guidance documents will be kept under review. Consideration will be given to the appropriateness of broader consultation as part of this process.

Speech and Language Therapy

1276. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the timeline for the reopening of HSE speech and language therapy sessions. [15884/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As the Deputy's question relates to a service matter, it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

HSE Agency Staff

1277. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the reason agency nurses being interviewed for permanent posts within the HSE are being offered zero-hour contracts and in cases in which they refuse, are faced with going through the interview process again for a 39 hour contract post. [15885/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly on this matter.

Covid-19 Tests

1278. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health his views on reports that some private hospitals plan to charge patients up to €250 for a Covid-19 test before they can undergo a procedure in the hospital; if clarity will be obtained from private hospitals in respect of the matter in view of the substantial funds received by such hospitals from the State during the Covid-19 emergency period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15888/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy will be aware, I do not have any responsibility for private hospitals, including in relation to charges that they apply.

An arrangement was agreed with the private hospitals earlier in the year to use their facilities as part of the public system on a temporary basis, to provide essential services in anticipation of additional demand on public hospital services. Under the arrangement, all patients in private hospitals were treated as public patients while the agreement was in place. On review, the Government decided that the existing arrangement should not be extended beyond the end of June, and on 1st July 2020 all private hospitals reverted to private activity. The Department of Health does not have a role in the operational functions of private hospitals.

More broadly in relation to testing, the HSE has developed guidance for the management of planned hospital admissions for non-COVID care which sets out advisory testing strategies for hospital patients. This guidance seeks to provide an advisory framework for mitigating risks associated with the delivery of non-COVID care while COVID-19 continues to be prevalent, and testing provides one of a number of measures that can be taken to reduce risk.

As with any procedure or test, there will be a cost. I am not in a position to comment on what the actual cost may be in private hospitals, however, I understand that the costs arising from testing for COVID-19 in public hospitals is much lower than the upper charges quoted by the Deputy.

In addition, I can confirm that the NTPF have advised my Department that no patient is liable for any charge from a private hospital for services arranged by the NTPF.

Obesity Strategy

1279. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health when an initial progress report on each recommendation in the Obesity Policy and Action Plan 2016-2025 will be issued by the obesity policy implementation oversight group. [15891/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): ‘A Healthy Weight for Ireland’, the Government’s Obesity Policy and Action Plan (OPAP), was launched in September 2016 under the auspices of the Healthy Ireland agenda. It covers a ten year period up to 2025 and aims to reverse obesity trends, prevent health complications and reduce the overall burden for individuals, families, the health system, and the wider society and economy. It must be emphasised that every sector of our society has a role in reducing the burden of obesity and the OPAP clearly acknowledges this.

An Obesity Policy Implementation Oversight Group (OPIOG) was established in October 2017 and the progress report on each recommendation in the OPAP is currently being finalised under the aegis of the OPIOG. The progress report is at an advanced stage, but its completion was delayed due to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on Departmental business. However, it is now hoped to have it completed in the coming weeks and published shortly thereafter.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1280. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons that will be able to attend weddings in September 2020 under the revised Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business guidelines. [15893/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy is aware, on 19 June 2020, the then Taoiseach, on behalf of the Government, announced the restrictions that would be eased and the measures that will be in place in Phase 3 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business. On Thursday 25th June the Government confirmed the move to Phase 3 of the Roadmap from Monday, 29 June 2020. Information and advice about the restrictions that have been eased as part of Phase 3 and the measures that are now in place are available on the Government website at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d06271-easing-the-covid-19-restrictions-on-29-june-phase-3/>.

Gatherings of 50 people (indoor) and 100 people (outdoor) are permissible in line with the public health guidance on mass gatherings, which is also available on the Government website at <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/77452/39d51b02-5633-4e2f-a070-4551a3521081.pdf#page=6>. The limits will increase to 100 (indoors) and 500 (outdoors) in phase 4. This will be subject to continued progressive improvements in the health indicators identified in the Framework for Future Decision-Making described in the Roadmap.

As the Deputy will be aware, religious buildings and places of worship may also now be reopened, in line with public health guidelines. The Government has exempted places of worship from the regulations restricting numbers on mass gatherings. The exemption applies to places of worship only and not to any gatherings that may take place after the religious ceremony such as wedding receptions.

Detailed Covid-19 Guidance has been developed for religious services. The Cabinet Committee reviewed the guidance, which state that an assessment should be carried out for each premises to determine how many can attend within the requirements of social distancing.

The Cabinet Committee decided that where the size of the premises allows for a capacity of greater than 50 this may be permitted only where:

- Social distancing guidelines are adhered to
- The premises can be subdivided into distinct sections (cordoned or marked appropriately) of not more than 50 persons in each section
- There is a minimum of 4m between sections
- Each section has its own entrance/exit route
- There are separate arrangements for elements of the service involving close contact, e.g. the distribution of Holy Communion
- Strictly no movement of people between sections before, during or after the service
- The premises is well-ventilated.

Account must also be taken regarding the risk of congregation by people outside before and after any services, having regard to outdoor overall limits on mass gatherings and arrangements for staggered exiting after ceremonies.

The use of face coverings is strongly recommended for such indoor settings.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1281. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health the initiatives, including transnational initiatives, Ireland is involved in for the development of a vaccine or treatment for Covid-19; if the initiatives are based on a principle of free or affordable global access; if Ireland is participating in the people's vaccine initiative from UNAIDS; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15915/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that the availability of a safe and effective vaccine for COVID-19 is well-recognized as an additional tool to contribute to the control of the pandemic, while simultaneously recognising that the challenges and efforts needed to rapidly develop, evaluate and produce this at scale are enormous.

On 24 April, the World Health Organization (WHO) hosted the launch of the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator, a new global collaboration to accelerate development, production, and equitable access to COVID-19 diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccines. Within the Accelerator, Gavi, CEPI, and WHO together with multinational and developing country vaccine manufacturers are working on the COVAX (vaccine) Pillar to develop the COVAX Facility.

The Facility provides governments with the opportunity to benefit from a large portfolio of COVID-19 candidate vaccines using a range of technology platforms, produced by more manufacturers across the world, with a bigger market to provide security of demand – often with greater scope than governments or regional groups can support on their own. Even where governments already have access to a portfolio of candidate vaccines, it acts as an insurance policy through economies of scale and portfolio diversification.

Ireland has signed an expression of Interest letter indicating interest in participating in the Covax Facility, and accordingly in procuring vaccines from the Facility for the country.

In addition, to ensure that Europeans have access to a vaccine in a timely and fair manner, the European Commission proposes to conclude a number of advance purchase agreements with vaccine manufacturers. The contracts with companies would take the form of Advance Purchase Agreements (APAs) and would be concluded through a procurement process run by the Commission on behalf of all participating Member States. The related funding would come from the Emergency Support Instrument (ESI). The budgetary authorities, the European Parliament and the Council, have made EUR 2.7 billion available under the ESI. The Commission stands ready to commit the large majority of those funds to APA-related activities.

This process will respect the principle of subsidiarity and Member States competences as the central procurement action would only conclude the APAs with all relevant conditions, whereas the actual purchase and subsequent use of the vaccines product under the resulting framework contract would remain under the responsibility of the individual Member States.

A Steering Board has been established to run the procurement centrally and efficiently. The SB is chaired by the Commission and includes senior officials from all interested Member States to assist and provide guidance throughout the evaluation process. Ireland is represented on the Steering Board. For full transparency, the Commission proposes to report regularly to the Integrated Crisis Political Response (ICPR) on overall progress more generally.

Question No. 1282 answered with Question No. 1275.

Disability Support Services

1283. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the progress made regarding day services for persons with disabilities further to the publication of a HSE document, entitled the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services; the way in which and when day services for persons with disabilities will open under the framework; the transport solutions that will be provided for persons accessing services under the framework; if school leavers with a disability will be provided for under the framework; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15924/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 9 July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

The guidance document seeks to support the safe return of services in the context of ongoing public health guidance. It also recognises that the impact of public health guidance will result in services being provided at a reduced level and will require changes in how people are supported, increased use of technology where appropriate and more use of outreach supports.

Day services will gradually resume during the month of August. Service providers are already working to get day services ready to reopen safely, and in line with public health guidance. Service providers will be in touch with all families and service users during the month of July to discuss when they may expect the resumption of their service and what that service will consist of.

As services resume it will be necessary to identify how transport can continue to be provided in as safe a manner as possible and strictly within social distancing and other COVID-19 precautions. Transport providers will have to demonstrate that their transport services are safe and that all COVID-19 precautions have been established and observed. The guidance includes general guidelines and a risk assessment matrix on safe transport.

With regard to school leavers, the HSE are continuing to plan to meet the needs of all young people leaving school and people leaving Rehabilitation Programmes in 2020 that may require a HSE funded Adult Disability Day Service. Ring-fenced resources to facilitate this have been provided as part of the HSE's National Service Plan 2020. People that have left school and require a day service will be introduced to a new service during September, and school leavers referred to the HSE can continue to communicate with their contact person by telephone or email.

I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that this will be the first step towards returning to some sense of normalcy.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: www.hse.ie/newdirections. The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, the latest leaflet “Adult Disability Day Services and COVID-19 - What’s Happening? July 2020” is available at the above link.

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.

Traveller Community

1284. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the dates on which the Traveller health advisory committee met between 2010 and 2020 inclusive in tabular form; the date on which it will next meet; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15925/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): The Traveller Health Advisory Committee ceased in 2012, following a formal review which found that:

- the committee did not function well, with limited efficiency and effectiveness and with differing views its role and remit;
- there were concerns around its membership and composition;
- there were overlaps between the role and composition of the committee and the Traveller Health Advisory Forum (structure chaired by the HSE); and
- there were a number of other contentious issues, including the lack of a response to the findings of the All-Ireland Traveller Health Study.

The Department of Health is committed to addressing the serious health inequalities facing the Traveller community, informed by the All Ireland Traveller Health Survey which was published in 2010.

The Department has ongoing engagement with the Traveller community on ways to improve Traveller health. In 2018, the Department convened a roundtable with Traveller organisations to discuss Traveller health concerns. This was attended by officials from various policy units in the Department.

The Department is currently working with the HSE to develop a national Traveller health action plan. This is one of 35 actions in the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy to improve the health status of Travellers and Roma, covering the areas of improved access to health services, reductions in health inequalities, culturally appropriate delivery of health services and reductions in suicide and mental health.

The strategy is overseen by a steering committee including government departments and agencies, and Traveller representative organisations.

I am determined to publish and implement the national Traveller health action plan, which is a commitment in the Programme for Government. Together with the Minister for Health, I look forward to receiving the health action plan from the HSE and to support the implementation of the plan. I will consider the arrangements for engaging with the HSE and with Traveller organisations to implement the plan.

Medicinal Products

1285. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health his plans to make adjuvant immunotherapy, nivolumab and pembrolizumab available to public patients with stage 3 melanoma; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15926/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE has statutory responsibility for medicine pricing and reimbursement decisions, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013. The Act specifies the criteria for decisions on the reimbursement of medicines.

In line with the 2013 Act and the national framework agreed with industry, a company must submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the reimbursement list.

Reimbursement is for licensed indications which have been granted market authorisation by the European Medicines Agency or the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are made on objective, scientific and economic grounds, on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics (NCPE).

The NCPE conducts health technology assessments (HTAs) for the HSE and makes recommendations on reimbursement to assist HSE decisions. The NCPE uses a decision framework to systematically assess whether a drug is cost-effective as a health intervention.

The HSE at all times ensures that the systems that it has in place are designed to provide equitable access to all medicines across all therapeutic areas, cancer and non-cancer, from the resources provided to it.

In 2019 and 2020, the Vhi decided to extend cover to a number of new cancer medicines. The decision by the Vhi applies only to private care to private Vhi patients in private hospitals. It has no impact on the availability and use of medicines in public hospitals, where there is no distinction between public and private patients.

A number of the medicines, or indications (which includes pembrolizumab and nivolumab), which the Vhi has now decided to cover, are in process with the HSE with a view to making them available in the public hospital system.

I am advised by the HSE that it has received pricing and reimbursement applications for the indications listed below:

- Nivolumab (Opdivo®) as monotherapy is indicated for the adjuvant treatment of adults with melanoma with involvement of lymph nodes or metastatic disease who have undergone complete resection.

- Pembrolizumab (Keytruda®) as monotherapy is indicated for the adjuvant treatment of adults with Stage III melanoma and lymph node involvement who have undergone complete resection.

The HSE has confirmed that health technology assessments have been completed by the NCPE for both these indications. These applications for reimbursement are now being assessed by the HSE in line with the 2013 Health Act.

Disability Services Provision

1286. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Health when a service (details supplied) in Dublin 13 will reopen to service users. [15927/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 9 July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

The guidance document seeks to support the safe return of services in the context of ongoing public health guidance. It also recognises that the impact of public health guidance will result in services being provided at a reduced level and will require changes in how people are supported, increased use of technology where appropriate and more use of outreach supports.

Day services will gradually resume during the month of August. Service providers are already working to get day services ready to reopen safely, and in line with public health guidance. Service providers will be in touch with all families and service users during the month of July to discuss when they may expect the resumption of their service and what that service will consist of.

I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that this will be the first step towards returning to some sense of normalcy.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: www.hse.ie/newdirections. The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, the latest leaflet “Adult Disability Day Services and COVID-19 - What’s Happening? July 2020” is available at the above link.

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

Hospital Facilities

1287. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Health the status of St. Michael’s ward in Beaumont Hospital, Dublin 9. [15928/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Rare Diseases Strategy

1288. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health when the proposed new national plan for rare diseases will be completed; if a consultation process will be run to allow input into this plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15930/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): A National Rare Disease Plan for Ireland (2014 – 2018) was launched by the Minister for Health in July 2014. This is a generic policy framework for rare diseases. The scope of the plan is broad given that there are approximately 8,000 rare diseases affecting millions of EU citizens; and consequently, there can be a dearth of expertise and knowledge about some rare diseases, simply because they are so rare.

Many of the major recommendations of the plan have already been implemented including the establishment of a National Clinical Programme for Rare Diseases and a Rare Disease Office. Building on this progress to date, themes for inclusion in a roadmap for the coming period have been agreed with the Rare Disease Task Force, which comprises the main rare disease advocacy groups; Rare Disease Ireland, the Medical Research Charities Group (MRCP), and the Irish Platform for Patent Organisations, Science and Industry (IPPPOSI). The Rare Disease Plan is now firmly embedded in the work of the HSE Clinical Programme for Rare Diseases and the Rare Disease Office. This programme is now under the governance of the Office of the Chief Clinical Officer.

Meetings to ensure that the input and the voice of the patient is represented in the continuing work ongoing in relation to Rare Diseases take place at regular intervals with the Rare Disease Task Force, the HSE National Clinical Programme for Rare Diseases and the Rare Disease Office.

In addition, a number of key themes have been identified for future progress, including: Patient Awareness; European Reference Networks; Research & Registries; Access to Services; Access to Medicines; Diagnosis; Education & Training and Legislation & Policy.

Health Services Staff

1289. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Health the number of full-time paediatric occupational therapists and speech and language therapists in CHO 7 in 2019 and to date in 2020; and the number of vacant posts in CHO 7 as of 1 July 2020. [15932/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Hospital Data

1290. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Health the number of scoliosis surgeries carried out at Crumlin Children's Hospital in 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [15934/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Improving access to scheduled care is a key commitment of government. In recent years there has been increased investment in paediatric orthopaedics and scoliosis services, which has improved access to surgery and outpatient appointments. In 2018 Children's Health Ireland (CHI; previously the Children's Hospital Group) was provided with an additional €9 million in funding to address paediatric orthopaedic

waiting lists, including the provision of scoliosis services. As a result of this additional funding since 2018, CHI advise that there have been many improvements in paediatric scoliosis services, with increased activity and improved waiting times to access appointments and procedures.

CHI had advised my Department that they continue to develop sustainable solutions to reduce waiting times for children attending their orthopaedic and scoliosis services. The additional investment from the HSE in recent years and the implementation of the Scoliosis 10 Point Action Plan has increased orthopaedic activity levels across CHI. In addition, CHI has also advised my Department that a General Orthopaedic Surgeon, based at CHI Crumlin and Tallaght sites, is due to commence in Q3, 2020. This post is for general orthopaedic and trauma surgery, to support waiting list activity, and will further support waiting times for children for general orthopaedic outpatient appointments, including scoliosis.

My Department continues to engage with both CHI and the HSE in relation to paediatric scoliosis services.

In relation to the particular query raised and the specific breakdown of information requested, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

Home Help Service

1291. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Health the estimated amount it would cost in 2021 to provide 35,000 extra intensive home care packages. [15935/20]

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

Question No. 1292 answered with Question No. 1261.

National Dementia Strategy

1293. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health his views on the health impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on persons living with dementia and their family carers; his further views on the lack of consideration and strategy in terms of addressing the unique needs of this group during the pandemic; if the omission of the group will be addressed by specifically including it in current and future discussions and debate in relation to Covid-19 and other public health strategies and policies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15944/20]

1294. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health his views on a recently published report (details supplied); his further views on the conclusion in the report that policy and practice needs to focus on the way in which persons living with dementia and their informal and formal carers can be optimally supported; his plans to address same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15945/20]

1295. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health if the concerns of health professionals and organisations working with persons with dementia and their families that dementia has not been included specifically in data collection related to Covid-19 mortality or in the public messaging being issued will be addressed; the way in which he will address the lack of emphasis placed on the complex needs of those impacted by dementia in the community and in residential settings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15946/20]

1296. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether persons with dementia and their family carers have been rendered invisible during the Covid-19 crisis; the way in which he will ensure that dementia is given high priority in terms of public health policy, research into its impact and future planning with regard to Covid-19; if the issuing of guidelines for the reopening of services and supports for persons and their families will be prioritised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15947/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1293 to 1296, inclusive, together.

My Department is aware of the report referred to by the Deputy, which will contribute to our learning on the impact of Covid-19 on people living with dementia and help to inform how we meet their needs as we plan for the resumption of services.

I would like to assure the Deputy that there has been a continued focus on meeting the needs of people living with dementia throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Through the Dementia Understand Together Campaign, led by the HSE, and collaboration with other key stakeholders, a range of initiatives and resources have been developed to ensure that people living with dementia stay safe, well and connected, during this time of crisis. In addition, the Alzheimer Society of Ireland has played a key role in supporting people living with dementia in the home following the suspension of their day and respite services, through social and activity engagement calls, telephone support and family carer training.

The HSE has adapted its community services in order to provide a flexible response so that the needs of people with dementia continue to be met during the Covid-19 crisis. Primary care team support is operating nationwide, with referrals being made to community supports, including the Alzheimer Society of Ireland's dementia adviser service and the local authority community response forums. While home visits have been necessarily restricted, the HSE uses prioritisation and screening measures to identify clients needing home visits.

As the Deputy will be aware, people with dementia living in residential settings experience specific challenges. 23 Covid response teams have been established across network of Community Health Care Organisations (CHO) and these teams have geriatrician input, ensuring that the needs of the person living with dementia are incorporated into the overall plan for each nursing home.

As part of the public health follow-up of confirmed cases of Covid-19, information is routinely collected by the Health Protection and Surveillance Centre (HPSC) on whether a case has certain medical conditions, including chronic neurological disease. While I appreciate that many health professionals and organisations working with people with dementia would like to have dementia explicitly included as an underlying condition, the HPSC has to limit the number of conditions on its surveillance forms for the sake of brevity, as the people being interviewed are either caring for a very ill person or are very ill themselves.

The HSE is currently engaged in detailed operational planning across the primary and community sector that will underpin the phased resumption of community services, including supports for people with dementia, over the period ahead. This work will align with the recently published document "Service Continuity in a COVID Environment – A Strategic Framework for Delivery" which is available on the HSE's website at <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/service-continuity-in-a-covid-environment-a-strategic-framework-for-delivery.pdf>.

1297. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health his plans to ensure that same sex couples that received IUI and or IVF abroad will have full recognition of their parentage on birth certificates registered here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15948/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Parts 2 and 3 of the Children and Family Relationships Act 2015 commenced on 4 May 2020.

This provides a legal framework for registering the births of children who are born in the State as a result of assisted human reproduction involving donated eggs or sperm or embryos. The Act applies to procedures where the woman who gives birth is also the intending mother of the child.

Commencement of Parts 2 and 3 of the 2015 Act 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.

The Deputy may wish to note that procedures which take place outside of a clinical setting or outside the State from May 4th, 2020 do not fall within the scope of the Act and regulations for parentage will not apply in these circumstances.

Surrogacy is not covered under this legislation. The forthcoming Assisted Human Reproduction Bill contains provisions for areas including domestic surrogacy and the subsequent assignment of parentage.

Primary Care Centres

1298. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Health the status of the development of a new primary healthcare centre in Arklow, County Wicklow; the expected timeframe for the construction to completion of the project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15955/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

Medical Aids and Appliances

1299. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied) on use of pelvic mesh; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15956/20]

1301. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the findings of a review (details supplied) on vaginal mesh; his plans to implement similar responses to the issue here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15963/20]

1302. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to a recent UK report (details supplied) relating to women who have suffered injury as a result of pelvic mesh; his views on its recommendations for improving the ability of the healthcare system to respond in circumstances in which concerns have been raised regarding the safety of particular clinical interventions; if he will consider transposing recommendations from the report into the healthcare system here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15965/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1299,

1301 and 1302 together.

I note the recent publication in England of the report of the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety (IMMDS) review, “First Do No Harm” which was chaired by Baroness Cumberlege.

International evidence and learning play an important role in health policy considerations to promote safe, high quality care for patients. This report may add to that evidence and learning.

Over the past two decades, Uro-Gynaecological (Transvaginal) Mesh has been widely used in the surgical treatment of Stress Urinary Incontinence (SUI) and Pelvic Organ Prolapse (POP) in women. Mesh devices are certified as compliant with relevant EU legislation, and as such, European regulatory competent authorities consider that the benefits outweigh the risks for these devices.

In Ireland, considerable work has been done to date and continues to progress on patient safety in relation to mesh implants; and the patient voice is central to our understanding of these, and similar, issues. As part of the ongoing policy response, my department officials are examining options to establish a process for an independent, compassionate engagement for women affected by mesh to have their voices heard; and will make proposals to me in this regard. Any engagement process will need to take account of the wider context relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Concerns were raised in Ireland regarding complications associated with the use of mesh devices in late 2017, including a number of Ministerial representations from the women affected or on their behalf. At that time, the Minister for Health requested the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) to prepare a report on the clinical and technical issues involved in ensuring both:

1. the safe and effective provision of mesh procedures in urogynaecology and
2. an appropriate response to women who suffer complications as a result of undergoing such procedures.

This CMO Report was published in November 2018.

Importantly, the CMO report was informed by the available national and international evidence and the personal experiences of women who have suffered complications following mesh surgery.

Since July 2018, the HSE has paused all mesh procedures where clinically safe to do so. This was at the request of the CMO and undertaken in advance of completion of the final CMO report. The pause was instigated pending confirmation by the HSE of the implementation of initial recommendations relating to (i) professional training requirements, (ii) patient information and consent and (iii) the development and maintenance of a national data set for all mesh procedures carried out in HSE funded hospitals.

The CMO report identifies that for many women, surgical procedures using synthetic mesh devices have provided a more effective and less invasive form of treatment than traditional procedures. However, mesh devices are associated with significant and severe complications in a minority of women, which are of concern given the difficulties of mesh implant removal.

The CMO report made a number of recommendations, the implementation of which will provide significant assurance that both women presenting for treatment and who develop mesh-related complications, receive high quality, multi-disciplinary patient centred care in accordance with the evidence and supported by robust clinical governance mechanisms.

The HSE published a detailed Implementation Plan for the recommendations in the report in April 2019. The HSE's National Women & Infants Health Programme (NWIHP) is progressing treatment pathways and referral services for women suffering from mesh-related complications.

A multidisciplinary National Specialist Centre is being developed over 2 sites at Cork University Maternity Hospital (CUMH) and the National Maternity Hospital (NMH) Dublin. In addition, two translabial scanners, were procured by the HSE in late 2019, and are now on-site in both hospitals. However, the first scanning clinic, which was due to take place last March had to be postponed, due to the pandemic.

The HSE has published a dedicated webpage about vaginal mesh implants, including contact information for women suffering complications, which I hope is a useful resource. This can be found on the HSE website.

I would strongly encourage all women affected by mesh to engage with the relevant HSE contact points provided, to ensure that their service needs can be identified and provided for.

Legislative Process

1300. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his plans regarding the 2017 assisted human reproduction Bill; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15960/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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: gamete (sperm or egg) and embryo donation for AHR and research; surrogacy; pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) of embryos; posthumous assisted reproduction; and embryo and stem cell research. 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 recently-published Programme for Government affirms this Government's intention to enact this legislation.

Questions Nos. 1301 and 1302 answered with Question No. 1299.

Care of the Elderly

1303. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE can take over a nursing home (details supplied). [15990/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The nursing home referred to by the Deputy is a designated centre registered with the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA). It is an independent facility and as such its future is a matter for the provider in the first instance.

I understand that the centre requires substantial remedial works to be undertaken prior to their application for re-registration by October 2020. The nursing home have made a decision to close the facility no later than 11th October 2020 and actively engaged with residents and their families to seek alternative placements to ensure the continuing needs of the residents are met.

14 July 2020

The HSE and HIQA are aware of this decision. Further engagement is planned with the nursing home in relation to implications for the residents.

Disability Services Funding

1304. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if he is in receipt of a funding request from an organisation (details supplied); and if he will ensure the resumption of services for that entity in each HSE area as quickly as possible. [16001/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): 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

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

1305. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health his plans to reduce the social distancing guidelines for an organisation (details supplied). [16002/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): 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. The current advice is that you should follow social distancing guidance everywhere outside the home, including keeping a physical distance of 2 metres apart. It is also currently recommended that face coverings be worn in situations where social distancing is difficult to maintain, such as shops, and on public transport, or when meeting someone who is vulnerable to the virus, for example people who are cocooning. The recommendation applies to those people aged over 13 who can tolerate them.

Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 9 July 2020. The guidance document seeks to support the safe return of services in the context of ongoing public health guidance. It also recognises that the impact of public health guidance will result in services being provided at a reduced level and will require changes in how people are supported, increased use of technology where appropriate and more use of outreach supports.

As the Deputy's question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

National Lottery Funding

1306. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 674 of 7 July 2020, if he will provide the specific total amount made available by his Department and the HSE in 2010; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16013/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In 2010 my Department provided

€3.786m in National Lottery Funding. Details of the organisations and the amount each received are available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/af1133-department-of-health-lottery-funding-2008-2016/>.

I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy regarding the total amount of Lottery funding it provided in 2010.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1307. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health if Covid-19 health and safety guidelines will be issued to an organisation (details supplied) in respect of private therapist,s such as occupational therapists and speech and language therapists, who have been unable to treat patients since the public health crisis began; if these guidelines might incur costs to this sector; if grants will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16016/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): 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

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.

Addiction Treatment Services

1308. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if increased funding has been provided to drug and alcohol treatment centres in view of the fact that their bed capacity has been significantly reduced in line with public health guidance as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. [16018/20]

1309. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if increased funding has been provided to non-HSE drug and alcohol treatment centres in view of the fact that their bed capacity has been significantly reduced in line with public health guidance as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. [16019/20]

1310. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if additional bed capacity in drug and alcohol treatment centres will be provided as a result of an increase in alcohol and drug addiction issues due to the lockdown resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. [16020/20]

1311. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if a strategic plan will be put in place to assist persons who have developed drug or alcohol addictions or those that have had their drug or alcohol addictions increased due to the Covid-19 pandemic. [16021/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1308 to 1311, inclusive, together.

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, including addiction services.

I have therefore asked the Executive to investigate the matters raised by the Deputy and

reply directly to him.

Home Help Service

1312. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health the home services provided by HSE staff and home services provided by agencies for 2019 in terms of hours. [16023/20]

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

Home Help Service

1313. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health the home services provided in hours by HSE staff and home services provided by agencies to date in 2020. [16024/20]

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

Medicinal Products

1314. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the ongoing campaign by families of persons with the hereditary blood disease ATTR amyloidosis; and the status of the licensing of the drug patisiran. [16029/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drugs schemes, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013. The Act specifies the criteria for decisions on the reimbursement of medicines.

In line with the 2013 Act and the national framework agreed with industry, a company must submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the reimbursement list.

Reimbursement is for licensed indications which have been granted market authorisation by the European Medicines Agency or the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are made on objective, scientific and economic grounds, on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics (NCPE).

The NCPE conducts health technology assessments (HTAs) for the HSE and makes recommendations on reimbursement to assist HSE decisions. The NCPE uses a decision framework to systematically assess whether a drug is cost-effective as a health intervention.

I am advised by the HSE that it has received an application for the reimbursement of patisiran (Onpattro®) for the treatment of hereditary transthyretin-mediated amyloidosis (hATTR amyloidosis) in adult patients with stage 1 or stage 2 polyneuropathy.

In January 2019, a full health technology assessment was commissioned by the HSE. This assessment was completed in February 2020 with the NCPE recommending that patisiran (On-

pattro®) is not considered for reimbursement unless cost-effectiveness can be improved relative to existing treatments.

The HTA report will be an important input into the decision making processes of the HSE. The HSE is currently reviewing the report received and has recently met with the applicant company to discuss this.

Once negotiations between the HSE and the applicant company are complete, this application must then be formally considered by the HSE Drugs Group. The HSE Drugs Group is the national committee which the HSE has in place to make recommendations on the pricing and reimbursement of medicines. The decision making authority in the HSE is the HSE Executive Management Team.

I can confirm that I have received representations in relation to the reimbursement of patirsiran (Onpattro®).

Respite Care Services

1315. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to plans to restore or increase respite hours in the Cork area for families of children with special needs that had been reduced or paused during the Covid-19 pandemic, with particular reference, but not exclusively, to the respite services at Garretstown. [16030/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): 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.

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

1316. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health when an application by a person (details supplied) will be processed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16031/20]

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

Rare Diseases Strategy

1317. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when an updated national rare diseases plan will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16034/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): A National Rare Disease Plan for Ireland (2014 – 2018) was launched by the Minister for Health in July 2014. This is a generic policy framework for rare diseases. The scope of the plan is broad given that there are approxi-

mately 8,000 rare diseases affecting millions of EU citizens; and consequently, there can be a dearth of expertise and knowledge about some rare diseases, simply because they are so rare.

Many of the major recommendations of the plan have already been implemented including the establishment of a National Clinical Programme for Rare Diseases and a Rare Disease Office. Building on this progress to date, themes for inclusion in a roadmap for the coming period have been agreed with the Rare Disease Task Force, which comprises the main rare disease advocacy groups; Rare Disease Ireland, the Medical Research Charities Group (MRCP), and the Irish Platform for Patient Organisations, Science and Industry (IPPOSI). The Rare Disease Plan is now firmly embedded in the work of the HSE Clinical Programme for Rare Diseases and the Rare Disease Office. This programme operated under the governance of the Office of the Chief Clinical Officer.

Meetings to ensure that the input and the voice of the patient is represented in the continuing work ongoing in relation to Rare Diseases take place at regular intervals with the Rare Disease Task Force, the HSE National Clinical Programme for Rare Diseases and the Rare Disease Office.

In addition, a number of key themes have been identified for future progress, including: Patient Awareness; European Reference Networks; Research & Registries; Access to Services; Access to Medicines; Diagnosis; Education & Training and Legislation & Policy.

National Children's Hospital

1318. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the reason work has stopped on the national children's hospital; if there are legal proceedings under way on the project; the estimated cost to the State of such legal proceedings; the number of days lost due to legal proceedings; and the cost to the State per day of delays to the project. [16108/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The proceedings currently before the Commercial Court are related to the validity of the instruction given by the NPHDB to begin the Phase B above ground construction works in January 2019. As this matter is now before the Courts it would be inappropriate to comment further at this time.

I am anxious that the hospital be completed as quickly as possible on behalf of children, young people and their families. The NPHDB has statutory responsibility for planning, designing, building and equipping the new children's hospital and I have referred your question to the NPHDB for direct reply.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1319. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health when day services for persons with disabilities will resume; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16111/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 9 July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

The guidance document seeks to support the safe return of services in the context of ongoing public health guidance. It also recognises that the impact of public health guidance will result in services being provided at a reduced level and will require changes in how people are supported, increased use of technology where appropriate and more use of outreach supports.

Day services will gradually resume during the month of August. Service providers are already working to get day services ready to reopen safely, and in line with public health guidance. Service providers will be in touch with all families and service users during the month of July to discuss when they may expect the resumption of their service and what that service will consist of.

I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that this will be the first step towards returning to some sense of normalcy.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: www.hse.ie/newdirections. The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, the latest leaflet “Adult Disability Day Services and COVID-19 - What’s Happening? July 2020” is available at the above link.

Primary Care Centres

1320. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding a facility (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16122/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2020-07-14_pq1320_en.docx “>Document]

Covid-19 Pandemic

1321. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health the details of facilities that were block booked or taken over in County Mayo for use during the Covid-19 pandemic; the location, capacity and costs involved of each; the facilities that were used; the number of persons who were placed in the facilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16123/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is an operational matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Public Inquiries

1322. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of tribunals, public investigations and commissions of investigations in process; the length of time each has been under way; when each will conclude; the cost to date of each; and the estimated cost of each at completion. [16135/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Details in relation to a commission of investigation and a tribunal in process under the remit of the Minister for Health are set out below.

1. The Commission of Investigation (Certain matters relative to a disability service in the South East and related matters), “the Farrelly Commission”, was established by Government under S.I No. 96 of 2017, Commission of Investigation (Certain matters relative to a disability service in the South East and related matters) Order 2017 to investigate the care and protection of “Grace” (pseudonym) and others in a former foster home in the South East, which has been the subject of abuse allegations.

The first phase of the Farrelly Commission’s work is to investigate the role of public authorities in the care and protection of Grace, who resided with a former foster family in the South East of Ireland between 1989 and 2009. Phase 2 will commence following consideration of the Phase 1 Final Report and the Commission’s written statement on the scope of its further investigations.

The Farrelly Commission commenced work on 15 May 2017 and was due to submit its Final Phase 1 Report within one year of commencing its work.

The Farrelly Commission wrote to my predecessor as Minister for Health (Simon Harris, T.D.) to request a ten-week preliminary extension until Friday, 24 July 2020, to allow it to identify the time needed to complete its Phase 1 Final Report. Minister Harris granted the extension. He made this decision following discussion with his colleague, the Minister of State with Special Responsibility for Disabilities, Finian McGrath and his Cabinet colleagues.

This is the Farrelly Commission’s third extension. It is in addition to the two twelve-month extensions that were granted by Minister Harris in May 2018 and May 2019.

The Farrelly Commission’s costs to date are €5,247,054.55. The final cost of the Commission will be determined by my decision on the submission that the Farrelly Commission will provide to me by 24 July 2020 setting out the length of time that it has identified to allow it to complete its Phase 1 work and make its report.

2. The Hepatitis C Compensation Tribunal was established on a non-statutory basis in December 1995 to compensate people who had contracted Hepatitis C through the administration of Anti-D immunoglobulin, whole blood, or other blood products within the State. It was put on a statutory footing in November 1997 by means of the Hepatitis C Compensation Tribunal Act. The Tribunal’s remit was extended in 2002 to include individuals who had contracted HIV and to provide for additional heads of claim for the dependants of infected persons – loss of consortium, dependency losses, loss of society, post-traumatic stress disorder/nervous shock and future care claims. In 2006, the Hepatitis C Compensation Tribunal Act was further amended to provide for the establishment of an insurance scheme.

The Hepatitis C and HIV Compensation Tribunal will continue in existence until the last person infected with Hepatitis C dies and any claim lodged by their dependents is heard.

The total cost of the Hepatitis C and HIV Compensation Tribunal from 1995 to end December 2018 is €1.195bn. The estimated cost of the Tribunal in 2019 is €16.62m. These figures are provisional pending the publication of the Annual Report for 2019. This Scheme is demand led

and it is impossible to know precisely how much it will cost from year to year. The Scheme has cost an average of approximately €20m per annum over the last 5 years.