

## Written Answers.

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

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Note: Ministerial and Departmental titles have been updated in the Question text in anticipation of the relevant Government orders to give legal effect to the Taoiseach's announcement in Dáil Éireann on 27 June 2020.

*Questions Nos. 1-5, inclusive, answered orally.*

*Questions Nos. 6 to 9, inclusive, resubmitted.*

### Cabinet Committees

10. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on Housing will next meet. [22652/20]

**The Taoiseach:** The Cabinet Committee on Housing was established by the Government on 6 July 2020 to oversee effective implementation of the Programme for Government commitments in relation to housing.

The Committee last met on July 30th and is scheduled to next meet on Monday, September 28th.

*Questions Nos. 11 to 18, inclusive, resubmitted.*

### Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

19. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if supports are available for students who have to undertake placement in healthcare settings nursing, midwifery and medical students and as a result of Covid-19 guidelines, have had to give up paid employment for the duration of their placements; and if they will avail of the Covid-19 unemployment supports for the length of time they are unable to work. [24206/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland my Department has worked with its Offices and Agencies and across Government to develop a package of supports to assist businesses to open, to help those that are already open to stay open, and to get staff back to work. Full details of these supports for business are available on my Department's website at

*<https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.*

The provision of supports for students who are required to undertake placements in health

care settings is not a matter for which my Department has responsibility. The administration of general unemployment supports rests with my colleague the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection while the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has responsibility for the administration of the Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) Grant.

I note, however, that on 8 September, the Minister for Health, in responding to a similar question (PQ 22140/20) concerning the financial supports that will be put in place for student nurses who are unable to work whilst on placement, stated that guidance on the resumption of clinical placements was recently issued by the Chief Clinical Officer of the HSE to all Higher Education Institutes and copied to healthcare providers. This guidance included a revised version of the HSE's document, Infection Prevention and Control Requirements for Clinical Placements in HSE facilities in the context of COVID-19. This document, among other things, sets out the requirement for Infection Prevention and Control Training for all students. It also underlines that clinical placements are an essential part of student's education and training, ensuring that they will continue to receive the breath of clinical experience that they require.

The Minister indicated that, according to this guidance, students can move from a placement in one setting to a placement in another without an interval of time, provided they complete a COVID-19 Healthcare Worker Relocation Self Risk Assessment prior to commencing in a different location. Similarly, if a student continues part-time work in a healthcare setting during the same period as attending clinical placements, they are required to complete this self-assessment on an ongoing basis so that any need for testing may be identified. The guidance makes it clear that students should not present on clinical placement if they have any symptoms of acute infection.

The Minister stated that, overall, the guidance facilitates students in completing their education and training and, in doing so, it does not preclude them from working part time so long as they adhere to the infection prevention and control requirements. He confirmed that, in terms of financial supports, there is a travel/accommodation allowance which amounts to €50.79 a week to support those students to access the clinical placements they require.

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

20. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the supports and grants available to a construction business taking on new apprentices; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24258/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** My colleague the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is responsible for apprenticeships. He advises me that a grant of €3,000 is available to employers who register new apprentices between 1st March 2020 and 31st December 2020. Details of the scheme, and how to apply, are available on [www.apprenticeship.ie](http://www.apprenticeship.ie).

Further detail can be obtained directly from my colleague Minister Harris.

### **Renewable Energy Generation**

21. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if the photovoltaic pilot grant scheme will be continued (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24266/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** In July 2018 the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEA) launched a pilot scheme to help domestic customers who install rooftop solar photovoltaic (PV) equipment on their homes. The grant is available to homes built and occupied before 2011 and details of eligibility criteria and how to apply are set out on the SEAI website.

As of end August 2020 there were 3,691 applications who received grant support over the lifetime of the scheme with some €9.16million spent to date, saving approx. 3.1kT CO<sub>2</sub> per annum. Future funding of the Scheme will be considered in the context of the 2021 Estimates.

The Programme for Government - Our Shared Future - committed to prioritising the development of microgeneration, letting people sell excess power back to the grid by June 2021. The Climate Action Plan also committed to actions to ensure that renewable self-consumers can sell excess electricity they produce back to the grid. Action 30 of the Climate Action Plan commits to the delivery of a framework for micro-generation from renewable technologies including solar photovoltaic (PV), micro-wind, micro-hydro and micro combined heat and power (CHP), whilst ensuring principles of equity, self-consumption and energy efficiency first are incorporated.

A Micro-Generation working group, chaired by my Department, is examining an enabling framework for micro- generation which tackles existing barriers and establishes suitable supports within relevant market segments. This work aligns with the Programme for Government and is an integral part of our emerging Photovoltaic Solar Strategy. The proposed support mechanism will be outlined in a public consultation in the coming months. A suitable support payment for excess electricity generated on site and exported to the grid will be available to all micro-generators by 2021 in line with transposition of the recast Renewable Energy Directive (2018/2001) into Irish law.

## Road Projects

22. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport if he is receipt of a funding request from a local authority (details supplied). [24224/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Deputy is aware, 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. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the local authority.

Following consideration of applications received from local authorities I recently announced the grant allocations for Climate Change Adaptation measures under the Government's July Jobs Stimulus Plan. A total of €14.1 million has been allocated to local authorities under the Department's regional and local road maintenance and improvement grant programme for measures related to addressing the impact of climate change on the road network.

Cork City Council's application for Climate Change works did include a project to repair existing flap valves at the quay wall outfall from the Atlantic Pond at a cost of €60,000. The Climate Change Adaptation programme was oversubscribed and as a result not all schemes applied for received funding. Priority was given to maintenance and improvement works on the regional and local road network in relation to measures addressing the impact of climate change. In this context the proposed works at the Atlantic Pond were not approved for funding.

Cork City Council received a total allocation of €226,000 under the Climate Change Adaptation measures.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

23. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Transport if Limerick City Council will be granted an additional three month extension in regard to the July stimulus funding provided to it by the NTA for €10 million which has to be allocated by November 2020. [24278/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Deputy is aware the Government announced a stimulus package in July of this year and as part of that package I was delighted to announce additional funding to support active travel. All local authorities were invited to apply for this funding. In addition, local authorities funded under my Department’s regional and local road maintenance and renewal grant programme were able to apply for funding in relation to climate change adaptation measures.

The July Stimulus measures were intended to be, and announced as, projects capable of delivery this year and appropriate deadlines have been advised to local authorities. Obviously funding to support active travel projects is available as part of our standard investment programmes and my Department and the National Transport Authority (NTA) work with local authorities across the country in that regard every year.

### **Driver Test**

24. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Transport if plans will be put in place to allow a person (details supplied) who passed their driver theory test in March 2020 but did not receive their licence until July to sit a driver test earlier than the prescribed six months after the licence issued; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24210/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** First-time learner permit holders must wait six months after the date of issue of their permit before they can sit their driving test. Unfortunately, an exception cannot be made to these requirements.

As part of the learning process, the 6 month rule for first time permit holders is designed to give the learner driver the opportunity to gain the minimum level of knowledge, skill and competency that a learner must demonstrate in order to become a fully licensed driver. The more practice and experience a person gets, the better a driver they are likely to become.

### **Transport Policy**

25. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the steps taken to legislate for e-scooters in accordance with the Programme for Government; his plans to recognise the role e-scooters play as part of Ireland’s sustainable transport mix year; if a second stakeholder consultation will be brought forward by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24265/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Any changes to the legal status of e-scooters require primary legislation which, as the Deputy will appreciate, may take some time. It is not simply a case of declaring them no longer illegal and permitting their use on public roads and in public places.

I intend to legislate for e-scooters in accordance with the Programme for Government. This will involve identifying and developing appropriate amendments to primary legislation across a range of complex areas. The work must be carried out in such a way that it does not undermine the overall framework of Road Traffic Law or Road Safety in general. The Government's current legislative priorities are the necessary measures to manage the Covid 19 crisis and to address its social and economic consequences.

My officials are currently looking at how progress towards the commitment can be made in light of the foregoing. The question of what further consultations should take place, with whom and how, will be considered, noting that experience overseas has shown that a change of regime may have consequences for road safety, the management of roads and footpaths, the movement of traffic, public transport and goods, public health and the environment.

### **Road Projects**

26. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport the position regarding the funding for the proposed Narrow Water bridge between counties Louth Down; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24355/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Following on from the Fresh Start Agreement, the "New Decade, New Approach" document indicates that the Government is ready to jointly progress consideration of options for the development of the Narrow Water bridge project at the North South Ministerial Council.

Options for the development of the Narrow Water Bridge project are under examination by relevant Departments, in consultation with Local Authorities, taking into account other proposed road projects in the area including the Newry Southern Relief Road. Consideration of options for a bridge is not at a stage where there is a clearly defined and costed scheme. Pending future decisions on the project, there is, therefore, no specific allocation of funding for the scheme.

### **Road Projects**

27. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the Ardee bypass project with the associated key timelines and relevant information; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24356/20]

**Minister for Transport (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 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.

### **Transport Policy**

28. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport his plans for legislation on electronic scooters and bicycles. [24362/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I intend to legislate for eScooters in accordance with the Programme for Government. This will involve identifying and developing appropriate amendments to primary legislation across a range of complex areas. The work must be carried out in such a way that it does not undermine the overall framework of Road Traffic Law or Road Safety in general. The Government's current legislative priorities are the necessary measures to manage the Covid 19 crisis and to address its social and economic consequences.

There are two types of e-bikes, both of which are already provided for in existing legislation. Pedal assisted electric bikes with a maximum speed of 25kph are treated as regular bikes. Pedal assisted electric bikes with a maximum speed of greater than 25kph are treated as low performance mopeds which require the appropriate licence, tax and insurance.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

29. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the uptake of the wage subsidy scheme; the number of refusals; the reasons for refusals; the number of successful appeals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24229/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) was legislated for in the recently enacted Financial Provisions (Covid-19) (No. 2) Act 2020, replacing the TWSS from 1 September 2020 until March 2021. It provides a flat-rate subsidy to qualifying employers, based on the number of qualifying employees on the payroll. This adaptation from the TWSS will allow employers to rely on the continuation of support over a longer period of 8 months while also ensuring such support is sustainable and affordable.

I am advised by Revenue that, as of 15 September 2020, there were 33,348 employers registered for the EWSS which is seen as a strong level of participation and proportionately more than half of all those who availed of the TWSS over the duration of that scheme.

In order to be eligible for the scheme, an employer must be able to demonstrate that his or her business will experience a 30% reduction in turnover or customer orders between 1 July and 31 December 2020, by reference to the corresponding criteria in 2019, as a result of business disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, the employer must have a tax clearance certificate to be eligible to join the EWSS and must continue to meet the requirements for tax clearance throughout the scheme.

The EWSS will be administered by Revenue on a 'self-assessment' basis and employers are required to undertake a review on the last day of every month to ensure they continue to meet the aforementioned eligibility criteria. Employers who, following a monthly review, find they no longer qualify must deregister for EWSS through ROS with immediate effect i.e. from the 1st of the following month and cease claiming the subsidy.

I am advised by Revenue that as entry to the EWSS is administered on a self-assessed basis,

there have been no refusals of entry to the scheme once an employer has tax clearance and so there are no appeals. Revenue will in the future, based on risk criteria, review eligibility. In that context, employers should retain their evidence/basis for entering and remaining in the scheme.

### **Illicit Trade**

30. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Finance the measures in place to counteract cross-Border smuggling and illicit trade in products such as tobacco, alcohol and fuel products and to ensure smugglers do not take advantage of the green lane corridors established during Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24264/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am assured by Revenue that combating the threat which cross-Border smuggling and the illicit trade in tobacco, alcohol and fuel products pose to legitimate business, consumers and the Exchequer is a priority for them.

Revenue acts against all aspects of the illegal tobacco trade and uses a combination of risk analysis, profiling and intelligence, and risk-based screening of cargo, vehicles, baggage and postal packages to intercept illicit products. Action after importation includes checks at retail outlets, markets and private and commercial premises.

Illicit trade in alcohol can occur through the diversion of untaxed alcohol onto the market, through the production of counterfeit alcohol and through smuggling from countries with lower taxes. Revenue takes appropriate action where illicit activity is detected and this action is informed by intelligence on criminal activity and risk-based examination of commercial traffic and stock in retail premises.

Steps taken by Revenue to combat the illegal fuel trade include the introduction of stringent supply chain controls and reporting requirements, and a rigorous programme of enforcement action. In addition, Revenue and the UK Revenue and Customs undertook a joint initiative to introduce a new marker for use in marked fuels, which came into operation from April 2015. The industry view is that the actions taken have been successful in curtailing fuel fraud.

Revenue and An Garda Síochána collaborate closely and with their counterparts in Northern Ireland, in the framework of the North-South Joint Agency Task Force, in acting against tobacco, alcohol and fuel crime. This cooperation plays a key role in targeting the organised crime groups responsible for much of this criminality, who operate across jurisdictions.

Regarding the movement or importation of goods into Ireland, Revenue implements a risk-based profiling approach which is designed to facilitate the legitimate movement of goods and to secure payment and collection of duty and VAT, as appropriate, while also protecting citizens, trade and the environment. During the ongoing COVID19 pandemic, in order to “green route” critical legitimate pharmaceutical products and medicines, Revenue has prioritised the processing of declarations relating to these products at ports and airports to ensure their uninterrupted importation and supply. Where compliance risks are identified in any shipment as a result of risk profiling, Revenue take the appropriate action to address the risk including documentary checks, physical inspections and the deployment of Revenue resources including staff, detector dogs and Revenue’s mobile scanner.

I am satisfied that Revenue’s work against cross-Border smuggling and the illicit trade in tobacco, alcohol and fuel products has achieved a considerable level of success. I am also satisfied that Revenue’s risk profiling regime addresses the ongoing risks posed by smugglers and organised crime gangs and that the cooperation at a national and international level is maximising effectiveness in combatting illegal and criminal activity.

### Tax Data

31. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance the number of persons with annual income levels by category (details supplied) in the most recent year for which full data is available, in tabular form. [24213/20]

32. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance the number of persons with annual income levels by category (details supplied) that received tax relief on their personal income for contributions to a pension, in tabular form. [24214/20]

33. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance the gross amount of tax relief provided for pension contributions in each of the past five years for which full figures are available, in tabular form. [24215/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 31 to 33, inclusive, together.

Regarding Question 24213/20, I am advised by Revenue that they publish a series of income distribution statistics which are available at link: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/income-distributions/it-ct-distributions.aspx>. Under this link, the table 'RVA01 Distribution of Income Tax by Type of Gross Income, Range of Gross Income, Marital Status, Year and Statistic' provides the distribution of taxpayers by range of income, for the years 2004 to 2018.

Regarding Question 24214/20, I am advised by Revenue that a breakdown of PAYE individuals who paid pension contributions in 2019 by annualised gross income band can be found in 'Table 7: Breakdown of Pension Contributors' on page 17 of Revenue's report titled 'Statistics and Insights from the First Year of Real-Time Payroll Reporting (PAYE Modernisation)'. This is published on Revenue's website at link: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/research/pmod-statistics-paper.pdf>.

The link provides the available data in relation to PAYE employees in 2019 and constitutes a large majority of the total pension contributions recorded for all taxpayer types in a year. Pension contributions data in relation to 2019 for the self-employed, and other pension contributions not facilitated through employers, will become available once tax returns in relation to 2019 are filed later this year.

Regarding Question 24215/20, I am advised by Revenue that the tax cost of pension contributions for the years 2014-2018 (the latest year available) can be found in Revenue's 'Cost of Tax Expenditures' publication available on the Revenue website at <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/tax-expenditures/costs-tax-expenditures.pdf>.

### Tax Data

34. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated revenue that could be raised from the imposition of an emergency 3% Covid-19 tax on the total assets of natural persons, whatever the legal form of tenure, of €1 million and over, rising to a 5% tax on assets of €10 million and over. [24295/20]

35. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated revenue that could be raised from the imposition of an emergency 3% Covid-19 tax on the assets of investment funds and holding companies. [24296/20]

36. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated revenue that could be raised from the imposition of an emergency 3% Covid-19 tax on the market value of all property transfers by legal persons. [24297/20]

37. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated revenue that could be raised from the imposition of an emergency 2% Covid-19 tax on the market value of property transfers by natural persons of €1 million and over. [24298/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 34 to 37, inclusive, together.

I am informed by Revenue that information in respect of the total assets held by individuals, investment funds and holding companies is not available and therefore an estimate of the yield from the introduction of an emergency tax as proposed in Questions 24295-20 and 24296-20 cannot be provided.

In relation to Questions 24297/20 and 24298/20, the available information relates to property transactions subject to Stamp Duty. I am informed the estimated the yield from varying the rate of Stamp Duty on residential and non-residential property is shown at page 18 of the Revenue Ready Reckoner available at: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/ready-reckoner/index.aspx>. I am further advised that Stamp Duty returns do not categorise purchasers by category such as natural or legal person.

### Tax Credits

38. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Finance the workers eligible for a tax credit for a work uniform; if childcare providers qualify for this tax credit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24352/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The flat rate expense (FRE) regime is an administrative practice operated by Revenue to ease the administrative burden on Revenue and on employees in certain sectors by facilitating the automatic granting of a fixed tax allowance to cover allowable employment-related expenses, without the need for annual claims by every employee concerned. It applies where both specific commonality of expenditure exists across an employment category and the statutory requirement for a tax deduction for expenses as set out in section 114 TCA 1997 is satisfied.

The expense should apply to all employees in that category and not be discretionary. Revenue has advised me that it will consider FRE applications where a large number of employees incur broadly identical qualifying expenses which are not reimbursed by their employer.

Applications are generally made by the representative bodies in the employment sectors concerned and are considered by Revenue based on the specific commonality of expenses within the employment category and compliance with the strictly applied statutory requirement for a tax deduction. I am advised by Revenue that a submission was received from Early Childhood Ireland who represent childcare workers in 2017, and having considered the submission, Revenue was not in a position to apply a flat rate expense, as the expenses were not wholly, exclusively and necessarily incurred in the performance of the duties of the employment.

Outside of the FRE regime, all employees retain their statutory right to claim a deduction under section 114 of the TCA 1997 in respect of an expense incurred wholly, exclusively and necessarily in the performance of the duties of their employment, to the extent that such expenses are not reimbursed by the employer.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

39. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to extend the Covid-19-related pension abatement waiver for HSE rehires beyond 30 September 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24216/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Deputy may be aware, the principle of abatement of a public service pension is longstanding within the rules of various public service pension schemes and pension abatement is an important aspect of the Public Service Pensions (Single Scheme and Other Provisions) Act 2012 (the “Single Scheme Act”). Section 52 (1) of this Act provides for the abatement of a public service pension where a retired public servant, whose pension is in payment, is re-employed in the public service such that no more of the pension when combined with the remuneration in the new job shall exceed the pensionable remuneration of the old job.

The policy rationale for this provision is to avoid a situation where individuals benefit from both a valuable public service pension and also a public service salary. Abatement represents a suitable and measured response to legitimate public concerns in this context.

Section 52(4) of the Single Scheme Act provides for a waiver of abatement, in exceptional circumstances where the position requires a person with particular training and experience and where that position cannot be filled other than by the employment of the pensioner.

The exceptional nature of the Covid-19 crisis has required some sectors, including the health sector in particular, to source staff at short notice to address the manpower challenges on the frontline in this crisis. Temporary waivers of pension abatement have been sought and provided under the legislation in order to facilitate these efforts. Retired staff have assisted with the filling of critical staffing gaps and increased service demands associated with the challenges caused by the virus. The duration of the current waiver for the health sector in this regard, as the Deputy points out, is valid until the end of September.

An application for any proposed extension of a Covid abatement waiver must be made to this Department accompanied by a business case. Such an application would be a matter for the relevant responsible Department in the first instance. My Department will examine cases made taking account of the particular circumstances on the one hand but also the need to uphold the intent and requirements of the legislation as well as the underlying policy on the other.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

40. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding a difference in spending figures between the July Stimulus plan and the Budget 2020 economic and fiscal outlook [24274/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The €1 billion increase refers to the increase in Exchequer capital spend between the sum budgeted for 2020 and the sum budgeted for 2021, which the Deputy will see in Appendix 7 of the 2020 REV.

Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF) is a technical statistical classification, which may differ in detail from the Exchequer figures. For example, Exchequer spend on certain schemes such as capital grants to assist farmers or assistance to householders installing home insulation will not be included as public GFCF.

## Flood Relief Schemes

41. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if funding will be made available for the Blackpool flood relief scheme in view of the fact that the work required is outstanding for a number of years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24372/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The Blackpool Flood Relief Scheme commenced in 2013 when the Office of Public Works, in conjunction with Cork City Council, appointed consultants to develop proposals to deal with the flood risk that existed in Cork City. The scheme was originally part of the Lower Lee Flood Relief Scheme. As it became clear, however, that a solution could be advanced for Blackpool ahead of the Lower Lee, a separate scheme was developed for Blackpool. Following extensive engineering and environmental analysis, public consultation, and a formal Public Exhibition, the proposed scheme was submitted to the Department for Public Expenditure and Reform for Ministerial Confirmation.

The Scheme is currently undergoing assessment by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform as part of the Confirmation process under the Arterial Drainage Acts. Further information has been requested by the Minister as part of the environmental impact assessment which he is carrying out on the scheme. This information is currently being prepared and is expected to be provided to the Minister in the next few weeks.

The estimated Total Project Cost of the scheme is €20.5m, based on current design, but is subject to change following the completion of the detailed design and tender process. Once the scheme is Confirmed, the detailed design will be completed and a tender competition held to appoint a works contractor. It is currently anticipated that construction will commence on the scheme by mid 2021.

## Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

42. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if the restart plus grant will be extended to bed and breakfast operators that have deferred their opening until 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24218/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The Restart Grant Plus for B&Bs was launched on Monday 14th September 2020. This Scheme was announced as part of the Government's July Jobs Stimulus package and Fáilte Ireland is administering the Scheme on behalf of the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation.

As the operation and administration of the Restart Grant Plus specifically for B&Bs is a matter for Fáilte Ireland, I have referred the Deputy's question to them for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

## Creative Ireland Programme

43. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the budget allocation for the Creative Ireland programme in 2019 and 2020, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24237/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The Creative Ireland Programme is a culture-based, all-of-Government initiative led by my Department that is designed to promote individual, community and national wellbeing. Its core proposition is that participation in cultural activity by everyone drives personal and collective creativity, with significant implications for individual and societal wellbeing and achievement.

The current annual budget allocations to the Creative Ireland Programme for 2019 and 2020 are set out below. These allocations support a vast array of initiatives, projects, activities and events delivered right throughout the country by a wide network of Creative Ireland partners.

Creative Ireland Programme funding provides significant opportunities for people of all ages, from all backgrounds and in every area of the country, to participate in, enjoy and benefit from creative activities and pursuits – covering all genres, disciplines and artforms – within their local communities, their schools, or their own homes.

-	2019	2020
Budget/REV allocations	7,150,000	6,150,000
Direct allocation to Arts Council (for Creative Schools)	-	1,000,000
COVID-19 Supports	-	2,933,000

As set out above, extra allocations have been made to Creative Ireland Programme initiatives as part of the additional supports provided by my Department to the wider culture sector as a direct response to the COVID-19 crisis. These include €0.5 million to support new initiatives in relation to positive ageing and creative wellbeing, as well as €2.433 million in supports to projects and initiatives under both the Creative Communities and Creative Youth pillars as part of the Government's July Stimulus package.

In addition to the allocations made by my Department, other Departments also contribute to the costs of ongoing Creative Ireland Programme initiatives. These include inter alia an annual €1 million contribution by my Cabinet colleague the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to support activities by local authorities under the Creative Communities pillar; over €3 million in annual support to Creative Youth initiatives by my Cabinet colleague the Minister for Education and Skills, and additional resources provided by the Arts Council to support the Creative Schools programme.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

44. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if a limited number of spectators will be allowed at sporting events in line with local evaluation of the number who can be safely allowed to attend including for games involving children and young persons. [24257/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The Government's Resilience and Recovery 20-21: Plan for Living with Covid-19, published yesterday permits attendance, at the current Level 2 of the Plan, by up to 100 spectators at outdoor sporting events and 50 spectators at indoor sporting events. Up to 200 spectators are allowed for outdoor stadia or other fixed outdoor venues with a minimum accredited capacity of 5,000.

In line with the Plan, specific guidance will be developed in relation to the number of spectators that will be permitted to attend sporting events in very large purpose built venues, taking account of the size and different conditions for larger events. The Expert Group on Return to Sport will develop proposals in this regard.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

45. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if she will bring forward the distribution of funding for swimming pools announced as part of the July Stimulus Package to avoid permanent closure of distressed pools (details supplied). [24358/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** As part of the July Jobs Stimulus, I announced a special fund of €2.5 million to support the reopening of publicly accessible swimming pools in recognition of the particular challenges pool operators face in reopening to the public. This funding will be administered by Sport Ireland. A grant scheme is currently being drafted. Full details of the scheme and the application process will be announced shortly.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

46. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if she will consider seeking community suggestions and providing grants for cultural and social events that are not screen based in order to avoid the dangers of excessive screen time and encourage outdoor activities during the winter. [24359/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The Government has published the Roadmap for Resilience and Recovery. This new Roadmap sets out clearly the balance between public health, economic and social aspects of living with COVID-19 will operate in the short to medium term. It will to bring greater certainty so that society and business can move forward.

The current Level 2 of the Roadmap is based on a medium-term approach to managing risk and repairing the damage that COVID-19 has inflicted on society. At all times the priority will be to keep our schools open, while keeping people safe and protecting the resilience of our economy and communities.

There is new guidance for indoor and outdoor sports and training together with cultural events in theatres and other arts events. There is also a new focus on wellbeing. The new Roadmap is available at this link <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/18e18-level-2/>.

In addition, the Government Plan for Living with COVID-19, Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021, published yesterday, includes provisions in respect of community wellbeing that recognises safe engagement in and watching of our favourite sports and cultural activities, both personal and collective, plays a vital role in protecting our mental health and well-being. The Plan seeks to facilitate and preserve the significant cultural and sporting landmarks in Irish life, both at local and national level and commits to putting communities and counties at the centre of solutions for their own areas in terms of recovery. In that context, a refreshed Government Wellbeing/Together/Resilience campaign will be developed including a local campaign element delivered by local authorities to promote awareness of and participation in local programmes, initiatives and amenities.

### **Animal Culls**

47. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention has been drawn to the fact that there is considerable concern among licensed deer hunters and expert groups such as an organisation (details supplied) over the delay in issuing permits under section 29 of the Wildlife Acts for the 2020/2021 open season for deer (details supplied); the number of applications processed to date; the number outstanding; the expected timeline to process the applications; his plans to address the delays caused by Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24250/20]

48. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention has been drawn to the fact that expert groups such as an organisation (details supplied) have made recommendations to address the backlog under section 29 of the Wildlife Acts for the 2020/2021 open season for deer in line with other Departments such as the Department of Transport extension of NCT certificates and driver licences; if his attention has been further drawn to a detailed recommendation which was made in December 2015 regarding the implementation of an online licensing system by the Irish Deer Management Forum to streamline and bring Ireland into line with other countries regarding the issuing of wildlife licensing permits; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24251/20]

49. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when he will meet an organisation (details supplied) to discuss the issues relating to the delays and proposed solutions to avoid future delays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24252/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 47 to 49, inclusive, together.

I am aware of some delays in my Department this year in processing deer hunting licence applications and I am aware that many deer hunters have not received their licences yet this year.

The delays arise as a result of the ongoing Covid-19 public health emergency and the effects this has had on travel and working arrangements. While staff in the unit that deals with the issuing of licences continued to attend the office during the crisis, given restrictions, the numbers of such staff attending was, of course, restricted. The database system used for managing deer licensing is not currently a web based one and some technical challenges arose in facilitating the processing of such licences for staff working remotely with laptops.

Several thousand licences applications have been received to date and over two thousand have been issued thus far. Staff are working flat out to eliminate the backlog as quickly as possible.

I am aware that it has been suggested by individuals, hunting and farming bodies that I would extend licences for the previous deer hunting season to allow hunters with such a licence to hunt after 1 September with their previous licences. However, the provisions in the Wildlife Acts do not allow for the extension of deer hunting licences and licences for last season automatically expired under the law on 31 July this year.

The priority of staff now is to have licences issued as quickly as possible. It is my Department's intention to review the legislative and administrative arrangements in relation to deer licensing with a view to securing improvements for customers and I will welcome the views of stakeholders in this regard. The main priority for now is to deal with the backlog on hand. In addition, it is the intention to work towards the introduction of an on-line application system

and some early work in this regard has taken place and I will work to see that this happens as quickly as possible.

### **Constitutional Amendments**

50. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the plans and timelines he in mind with regard to the holding of a referendum on the public ownership of water. [24204/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Programme for Government provides that the Government will refer the issue of the environment, including water, and its place in the Constitution, to a relevant Joint Oireachtas Committee for consideration. I and my Department look forward to engaging with the relevant Committee when work proceeds on this issue.

### **National Monuments**

51. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps he will take to intervene and protect the national monument at 40 Herbert Park by preservation order as a monument, the preservation of which is a matter of national importance now threatened with demolition. [24225/20]

54. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will consider classifying 40 Herbert Park, the home of 1916 veteran Michael Joseph O'Rahilly known as The O'Rahilly, as a national monument. [24275/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 51 and 54 together.

Part IV of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, gives primary responsibility to local authorities to identify and protect the architectural heritage by including particular structures on the Record of Protected Structures (RPS). Inclusion on the RPS places a duty of care on the owners and occupiers of protected structures and also gives planning authorities powers to deal with any development proposals affecting them. I understand that the building in question is not included on the Dublin City Council's current RPS.

As Minister, I may also make recommendations to local authorities for buildings and structures to be included on the RPS. These recommendations arise from the surveys of my Department's National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (NIAH). However, the area in which the building in question is located has not yet been surveyed by the NIAH.

There is no mechanism per se under the National Monuments Acts for classifying a structure as a national monument. The Minister may place a Preservation Order on a building or structure in certain circumstances where, in the opinion of the Minister, it is a national monument 'by reason of the historical, architectural, traditional, artistic or archaeological interest attaching thereto.' In this case, the building itself forms part of a site in respect of which a Strategic Housing Development application was submitted to An Bord Pleanála for approval earlier this year and in respect of which my Department provided its observations as a statutory consultee under the Planning and Development Acts. I understand that the Bord has now made a determination on that application.

## **Disability Support Services**

52. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the DPG scheme is a separate funding stream to the housing adaptation grant funding; the way in which the criteria for the two grants differ; if he will clarify what is covered by the DPG grant and the application criteria for the grant; the amount of funding local authorities can apply for under the DPG funding stream; and when Louth County Council last applied for funding under the scheme. [24232/20]

56. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the funding for disabled person's grants has been amalgamated with housing adaptation grants. [24285/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 52 and 56 together.

My Department provides funding every year for the Disabled Persons Grant (DPG) scheme and the Housing Adaptations Grant for Older People and People with a Disability scheme. While both schemes are administered directly by the local authorities they operate independently with separate funding streams, the main differences being the type of properties eligible for funding and the level of local authority contribution. DPG funding is provided for adaptations and extensions to existing social housing stock to meet specific needs of the local authority tenants with a 10% contribution required from the local authority, while the Housing Adaptation Grants address specific needs of older people and people with a disability in privately owned homes with a 20% contribution required from the local authority.

Both schemes involve works that are necessary to address the needs of older people or people with a disability. This may involve adaptations, such as stair lifts, grab rails, accessible showers, wet-rooms, ramps, etc., but can also provide funding for more significant adaptations such as extensions, for example in the case of overcrowding, or the installation of a downstairs bedroom or bathroom.

In the case of the DPG scheme, it is a matter for individual local authorities to work within their annual funding allocation, assess individual applications and prioritise the works required under the scheme within available funding. The Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability scheme provides grant funding to eligible applicants in private houses to make their accommodation more suitable for their needs. These grants include the Housing Adaptation Grant for People with a Disability, the Mobility Aids Grant and the Housing Aid for Older People Grant, which are 80% funded by the Department, with a 20% contribution from the resources of the local authority. The Scheme is more sharply focused towards lower income households with the greatest needs. A means test applies to the Scheme in order to achieve fairness and value for money in its operation.

In 2020 and in line with previous years under the DPG scheme, local authorities including Louth County Council were asked to submit details of its work proposals and related funding requirements for the year. Following an assessment of the local authority returns, I recently announced the 2020 funding allocations and some €18m is being made available this year, an increase of 19% on 2019 levels. Details of the funding allocations, which includes funding towards the Improvement Works In Lieu Scheme (IWILs) for some local authorities, are available at the following link:

*<https://rebuildingireland.ie/news/minister-obrien-approves-some-e18-million-in-funding-for-the-disabled-persons-grant-scheme-and-the-improvement-works-in-lieu-of-local-au->*

*thority-housing-scheme/.*

My Department provides 90% funding towards the cost of eligible DPG works per property with the remaining 10% being provided by the local authorities. The local authority can carry out works up to a maximum level of €75,000 per property without the prior approval of the Department; requests for funding in excess of this can be submitted to the Department for consideration on a case by case basis. In 2020, Louth County Council has been allocated €367,408 under the DPG scheme and along with the Council's 10% contribution, means funding of €408,231 this year. Separately in 2020, they have received an additional €83,902 for accrued commitments from 2019.

### **Fire Safety**

53. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of call-outs from the fire brigade in relation to the illegal use of fireworks in each of the past five years by area in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24247/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (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 fire authorities under the Fire Services Act, 1981. My Department supports fire authorities through setting general policy, providing a central training programme, issuing guidance on operational and other fire safety related matters and providing capital funding support for purchase of equipment and priority infrastructural projects.

My Department collects statistics from local authorities, on an annual basis, regarding fire service attendance at incidents and the types of incident involved. Fire statistics for the past five years are available at the link below:

*<https://www.housing.gov.ie/local-government/fire-and-emergency-management/fire-statistics>.*

My Department does not routinely collect data in regard to the number of call-outs from the fire brigade in relation to the illegal use of fireworks. However, it is my understanding is that such information is not readily available as 'fireworks' is currently not listed as an individual and identifiable category of call-out by the fire services.

*Question No. 54 answered with Question No. 51.*

### **Weather Events**

55. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the details of the weather warning issued to Galway County Council in relation to the severe rainfall in the Connemara area on 1 and 2 September 2020; the time the weather warning was issued and to whom; the status of the weather warning; the analysis undertaken to establish the reason for the flooding, in particular the impact of the conversion of upstream land from bog to sitka spruce plantations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24280/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Met Éireann is the National Meteorological Service of Ireland and one of its most important roles is to issue weather forecasts and warnings for Ireland. The Public Weather Service pro-

vided by Met Éireann prioritises the protection of life and ensuring citizen safety. The service also supports the activities of the citizen and other agencies to mitigate damage to property and reduce disturbance to economic activity and so enhance support for impact-based decision making for weather events.

Met Éireann's main suite of warnings are issued by the duty forecaster between 10am and midday and are updated as necessary as new information becomes available. In general, warnings will not be issued more than 60-hours ahead of the expected adverse weather but advisories on potential hazards are issued up to a week in advance.

The weather forecast for Tuesday night (1 September) and daytime Wednesday (2 September) was for spells of heavy rain and spot flooding.

A Status Yellow Rainfall warning was in operation for daytime Wednesday 5am to 5pm for the northwest (issued 4pm Tuesday, 1st). This yellow rainfall warning was extended to Connacht, Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan on Wednesday morning valid from 10am to 9pm Wednesday (issued 9am Wednesday, 2nd).

While the general forecast was for heavy rain and a risk of spot flooding the rain was much heavier than forecast, further south than forecast and also occurred earlier than forecast. The heavy rain was expected to be in the northwest during Wednesday with the cold front whereas it was in the west with the warm front on Tuesday night.

Intense rainfall in west Galway resulted in the Owenglin River breaking its banks and flooding 17 houses. Rainfall totals of 70mm in a 24hr period were recorded at Connemara national park (CAMP station). The flood was short lived.

A number of local factors may have contributed to the magnitude of the event including that the river is very flashy and responds quickly to heavy rain, and the backup of water at a small bridge in the town.

There was a wet end to August, with soils being in a saturated state. This would result in rainfall running directly to the river.

It is noted that this catchment area does not have any Office of Public Works (OPW) river gauges which could be used to monitor river levels. As part of the development of the National Flood Forecasting and Warning Service, Met Éireann is engaged in a program of fluvial model development, trials of which are expected to begin in Q3 2021. The Owenglin is included in this phase of development.

Any analysis to establish the reason for the flooding or the impact on the conversion of land use is a matter for the OPW who lead and co-ordinate the implementation of Ireland's National Flood Risk Policy.

*Question No. 56 answered with Question No. 52.*

### **Disability Support Services**

57. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the allocation by each local authority for housing adaptation grant for people with a disability in each of the years 2013 to 2020; and the amount each local authority drew down in each year from the allocation for the purposes of the grant. [24286/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):**

My Department provides funding under the suite of Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability, to assist people in private houses to make their accommodation more suitable for their needs. The grants include the Housing Adaptation Grant for People with a Disability, the Mobility Aids Grant and the Housing Aid for Older People, which are 80% funded by my Department, with a 20% contribution from the resources of the local authority. Local authorities receive an overall allocation, with the responsibility for the apportionment between the three schemes being a matter for each authority.

Details of the grants, up to 2018, are available on my Department's website at the following link:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/statistics/social-and-affordable/other-local-authority-housing-scheme-statistics>.

The Table below contains details of the exchequer funding drawn down by local authorities for the grants up to 31 December 2019, and up to 31 August 2020, with each local authority providing an additional 20% own contribution.

Local Authority	Exchequer Drawdown to 31 December 2019	Exchequer Drawdown to 31 August 2020
Carlow	€1,337,450	€620,961
Cavan	€992,380	€262,905
Clare	€2,399,552	€666,346
Cork	€4,323,799	€1,048,229
Cork City	€981,908	€401,352
Donegal	€1,333,144	€675,797
Dublin City	€7,395,113	€2,856,850
Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown	€1,159,572	€480,671
Fingal	€2,043,228	€548,857
Galway	€1,695,312	€793,170
Galway City	€807,777	€470,129
Kerry	€2,549,136	€1,204,780
Kildare	€2,497,750	€409,619
Kilkenny	€1,526,314	€794,593
Laois	€820,976	€95,216
Leitrim	€154,738	€103,544
Limerick	€2,659,000	€948,601
Longford	€575,984	€221,914
Louth	€1,176,836	€420,404
Mayo	€1,853,661	€656,455
Meath	€2,000,215	€621,951
Monaghan	€1,451,430	€1,116,572
Offaly	€1,294,412	€44,088
Roscommon	€1,075,381	€233,358
Sligo	€1,162,243	€152,557
South Dublin	€1,785,306	€1,039,668
Tipperary	€2,944,856	€1,322,831
Waterford	€1,220,152	€454,325

Local Authority	Exchequer Drawdown to 31 December 2019	Exchequer Drawdown to 31 August 2020
Westmeath	€1,043,669	€291,435
Wexford	€1,896,870	€835,987
Wicklow	€1,108,370	€403,652

For 2020, a total of €73.75 million has been provided for the grants, details of which can be found at the following link:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/0c0cf-minister-obrien-announces-over-73-million-for-housing-adaptation-grant/>.

### Fire Service

58. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if membership of the retained fire service is a breach of the Civil Service Code of Standards and Behaviour. [24299/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (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 fire authorities under the Fire Services Act, 1981. My Department supports fire authorities through setting general policy, providing a central training programme, issuing guidance on operational and other fire safety related matters and providing capital funding support for purchase of equipment and priority infrastructural projects.

The Civil Service Code of Standards and Behaviour is an important element of the overall framework within which all civil servants are expected to work. It sets out the standards required of civil servants in the discharge of their duties. These standards of behaviour and values will support a high quality public service, based on high levels of personal performance and responsibility. The Code falls under the remit of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The Code forms part of the terms of employment of all civil servants who are expected to apply it at all times. A copy must be given to every staff member on entry to the Civil Service and they will be required to certify in writing that they have received and read it. The Code is circulated to all existing staff who will be required to sign a similar declaration.

In regard to possible breaches of the Code it is a matter in the first instance to be discussed and where possible resolved between the employee and their employer. When this cannot be achieved my understanding is that the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform can where appropriate, assist and advise the relevant parties.

### Planning Issues

59. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the promoters of a development (details supplied) in Warrenpoint, County Down were obliged to notify Louth County Council of this development under transnational planning regulations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24368/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):**

The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Directive (2011/92/EU), as amended by Directive 2014/52/EU, and the UN Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context (the Espoo Convention) both set out the obligations of Member States/Parties to assess the environmental impact of certain activities or proposed development at an early stage of planning. They also lay down the general obligation of States to notify and consult other States on all major projects under consideration that are likely to have a significant adverse transboundary environmental impact.

Under the EIA Directive and the Espoo Convention, “the Party of Origin” (the State in which the proposed development or activity is situated), is required to notify and consult with “Affected Parties” (adjacent/neighbouring States), where it considers that a proposed development or activity is likely to have significant adverse transboundary impacts. The Party of Origin then has to provide the public in the other State(s) with the opportunity to participate in a transboundary environmental public consultation on the proposed development or activity. This involves the Party of Origin making the relevant environmental information available to the other States and accepting submissions from the public during the consultation period.

My Department is responsible for ensuring that the planning system in Ireland is compliant with the State’s EU and International planning obligations, which includes EIA Directive and Espoo Convention processes in the Irish planning system. Ensuring that the EIA Directive or Espoo Convention obligations of Promoters or potential development applicants in another jurisdiction are adhered to, is a matter for the appropriate authorities in that jurisdiction, in accordance with their respective domestic legislation transposing such EIA Directive/ Espoo Convention obligations.

I can confirm that officials in my Department contacted officials in Louth County Council who have advised that permission was granted by authorities in Northern Ireland for the development referred to in this question on 20 October 2015, and that no transboundary notification was received by Louth County Council with respect to the proposed development. I can also confirm that my Department has no record of receiving any transboundary notification with respect to the proposed development which was permitted in 2015.

### **Foreign Birth Registration**

**60. Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the processing of foreign birth registrations, which was ceased due to Covid-19 has resumed; and if not, when processing will recommence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24269/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Foreign Births Registration Section has now resumed the processing of applications. 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. At present, it takes between 12 to 18 months to process an application to completion.

The Foreign Births Registration Section has also introduced a dedicated webchat service for those seeking further information in relation to their application for FBR. This webchat service is open weekdays from 9AM - 4:30PM and can be accessed through the Citizenship page on my Department’s website.

### **Brexit Issues**

61. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the outcome of the most recent discussion he has had with his British counterpart in relation to the Withdrawal Agreement with particular reference to the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24431/20]

62. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the outcome of the most recent discussions he has had with parties in the Northern Ireland Executive in relation to Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24432/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 61 and 62 together.

An Taoiseach, my Cabinet colleagues and I take every opportunity to engage, as appropriate, with counterparts in Britain and in Northern Ireland, to discuss matters arising from the UK's withdrawal from the EU, including the EU-UK future partnership negotiations, implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

Following the publication of the UK's Internal Market Bill on 9 September, the Taoiseach raised Ireland's grave concern with regard to the Bill directly with Prime Minister Johnson on that same day. We are also in continuing close contact with EU leaders on this matter and the Taoiseach spoke most recently with Charles Michel, the President of the European Council, on 13 September. The Embassy in London also continues to have extensive contact with representatives of the UK Government.

On 10 September, Ireland also took part in the extraordinary meeting of the EU-UK Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement at senior official level as part of the EU delegation. This meeting was also attended by representatives of the Northern Ireland Executive. At this meeting, the EU and Ireland made very clear to the UK Government our very serious concerns about the UK's Internal Market Bill. Commission Vice President Maros Sefcovic stated after the Joint Committee meeting that, if the Bill were to be adopted, it would constitute an "extremely serious violation of the Withdrawal Agreement and of international law". He called on the UK Government to withdraw by the end of the month those measures from the draft Bill which are in clear breach of substantive provisions of the Protocol.

We are in regular contact at political and official level with Northern Ireland representatives on a range of issues, including those related to Brexit. I particularly welcome the meeting in plenary format of the North South Ministerial Council which took place on 31 July, the first in over three years. Given the impact that Brexit will have across a range of economic and social sectors and on how we cooperate North South in these sectors and more generally, Ministers discussed the implications of the UK withdrawal at this plenary meeting. The Plenary will be followed by Ministerial meetings across the NSMC's policy sectors in due course. In July, I also met with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in Belfast, as well as with the leaders of the parties, for constructive discussions including on Brexit related issues. I continue to have regular and ongoing contact with party leaders in Northern Ireland.

In all of our engagements with the UK Government to date, we have made very clear the vital importance of full implementation of the Protocol, as agreed. Its negotiation was lengthy and detailed, and it represents a fair and balanced outcome for all parties, with compromises on all sides. It is clear that any unilateral departure from the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement is not acceptable.

Our view is that such a departure could seriously erode and damage political trust in Northern Ireland and between the EU and the UK. It also damages the trust needed to deliver a successful outcome to the Future Relationship negotiations. The Commission has clearly stated

that violating the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement would put at risk the ongoing talks.

We call on the UK Government to step back from this deeply concerning approach and to work now to repair the trust that is needed to successfully and faithfully implement the Withdrawal Agreement and Protocol. A positive resolution to this issue is in all our interests.

*Question No. 62 answered with Question No. 61.*

### **Defence Forces Reports**

63. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Defence if the commission on the Defence Forces will be ready by the end of 2020 as agreed in the Programme for Partnership Government; if he will provide a detailed timeline for its establishment and work and the details of its membership; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24389/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Programme for Government provides for the establishment of an independent Commission on the Defence Forces.

The Commission is to be established before the end of this year, with a mandate to report within twelve months. Planning for the Commission is in the early stages and no final decisions have yet been taken to date on its terms of reference and membership.

I am working to ensure that the Commission is established as early as possible before the end of this year.

### **Defence Forces Personnel**

64. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Defence his plans to recruit an additional full-time clinical psychologist for the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24236/20]

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

### **Defence Forces Remuneration**

65. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Defence his strategy to increase funding for the salaries of members of the Defence Forces. [24276/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Public Service pay policy is determined by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform having regard to Public Sector Pay Agreements.

Similar to other sectors in the public service, the pay of Permanent Defence Force personnel was reduced as one of the measures to assist in stabilising national finances during the financial crisis.

Pay is being restored to members of the Defence Forces and other public servants in accor-

dance with public sector pay agreements. The focus of these increases is weighted in favour of those on lower pay.

A 2% increase in annualised salaries is due for all members of the Permanent Defence Force from 1 October 2020, in accordance with the terms of the Public Service Stability Agreement 2018-2020. By the end of the Agreement the pay scales of all public servants (including members of the Defence Forces), earning under €70,000 per annum, will be restored to the levels in place prior to the introduction of the Financial Emergency in the Public Interest (FEMPI) legislation. The restoration of the 5% reduction to allowances cut under FEMPI is also scheduled for that time.

A High Level Implementation Plan “Strengthening our Defence Forces – Phase 1” is being progressed. The increase to Military Service Allowance and restoration of certain other allowances specific to the Defence Forces, as recommended by the Public Service Pay Commission, have been delivered. A Service Commitment Scheme for flying officers has also been restored. A number of projects in the Plan to enhance recruitment and retention are being delivered, while other projects relating to Defence Forces pay will feed into the negotiations for the next pay agreement.

The Government is committed to addressing pay and conditions in the Defence Forces and this is reflected in the Programme for Government. The Programme for Government provides for the establishment of a Commission on the Defence Forces. This will consider recruitment and retention issues and pay and conditions in the Defence Forces. Upon completion of the Commissions work, a permanent pay review body will be established.

### **Defence Forces Personnel**

66. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence if he has concerns regarding the recruitment and retention of trained medical personnel for the Defence Forces. [24364/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Defence Forces medical capability encompasses a broad range of disciplines including doctors (medical officers), dentists, physiotherapists and pharmacists. Vacancies in these disciplines are advertised as they arise and are filled in a number of different ways. The Defence Forces have also trained enlisted Defence Forces personnel at Emergency Medical Technician, Paramedic and Advance Paramedic grades.

Vacancies that exist within the medical officer discipline are filled by direct entry recruitment and through the Military Medicine Training Scheme. To date, in 2020, the Military Medicine Training Scheme has recruited an additional 2 doctors. There are currently 3 pending offers of employment for Direct Entry Medical Officer and consideration is being given to the conduct of further competitions.

The recruitment and retention of trained medical personnel, as with other specialist areas within the Defence Forces, is a matter of priority for me.

### **School Transport**

67. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Education when refunds will issue to parents who applied and paid for concessionary school transport tickets in circumstances in which no seats are available; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24226/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant opera-

tion managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. 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.

The closing date for payment for the 2020/2021 school year was Tuesday 4th August 2020. All children who are eligible for school transport and who applied and paid by the deadline have been 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 and are facilitated where spare seats exist after eligible children have been accommodated. Where the number of ineligible children exceeds the number of spare seats available Bus Éireann allocates tickets using an agreed selection process. Bus Éireann has already issued refunds to a number of ineligible children who were unsuccessful in acquiring a ticket on services that are operating to capacity at present.

The School Transport Scheme Family Portal was temporarily closed for applications and payments on the 20th August 2020. This temporary closure was necessary to complete the work required to issue tickets to families who at that time remained due to be allocated a ticket for school transport services for the 2020/2021 school year.

The School Transport Scheme Family Portal has now re-opened. However, parents/guardians making an application/payment at this time for the 2020/2021 school year are reminded that the closing date for payments for the 20/21 school year was Tuesday 4th August 2020. While it is possible to submit a payment, payments made at this time are now late. Late applicants and/or families who pay late are not guaranteed a seat and will only be allocated a seat if capacity is available once seats are allocated to those families who applied and paid on time for transport services for the 2020/2021 school year.

In addition, payments for Post-Primary seats completed or made after 4th August 2020 can only be considered when 50% capacity, required by new Covid19 public health guidelines, is achieved on each route.

In the event of not securing a ticket where no capacity exists, or on cancellation, a full refund will be issued.

### **State Examinations**

68. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education the basis of appeal of grades in the leaving certificate; if the deviation of the results of a school from a pattern in previous years can be a basis for appeal; if there is consideration being given to reserving some of the extra college places for late entry for persons who choose to sit the exam in November 2020 rather than accept calculated grades; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24205/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The results of the Leaving Certificate 2020 Calculated Grades were made available to all students who opted to receive them at 9.00 am on 7 September via the Calculated Grades Student Portal. I would like to congratulate all students for their achievements in what has been a very trying time for them due to the impact of COVID-19 on their education.

The Calculated Grades Student Portal has reopened on 14 September at 9.00 am to allow students to view their estimated percentage mark and calculated mark. Students may wish to have access to and consider this data if they are considering an appeal of their Calculated Grade.

Students who are disappointed with the Calculated Grades they have received in one or more subjects will have the opportunity to submit an appeal.

The appeals process is a process review focused on looking for errors in the transmission and processing of student data through the process.

It is not possible to appeal the information (estimated percentage mark or rank order) provided by the school. Due to the nature of the Calculated Grades system the professional judgement of the school is outside of the appeals process.

It should further be noted that the design of the statistical model and the application of the national standardisation process is also outside of the scope of the appeals process.

The appeals process has opened on 14 September and students can access this via the Calculated Grades Student Portal. Students will have until 5.00 pm on 16 September to submit an appeal.

The appeal process will include three stages:

Stage 1: Checks will be undertaken on the forms completed by the school and that the information was transferred correctly from the forms to the data collection system.

Stage 2: There will be a review to ensure that the data was correctly received and processed through the systems used in the national standardisation process conducted by the Department.

Data checks will include a check to ensure that the rank order of the class group for the subject and level taken has been preserved in the standardisation process and that students placed on the same school-estimated mark in the same subject and at the same level taken by the school are conferred with the same calculated mark.

Stages 1 and 2 will be taken together.

Stage 3: Students unhappy with the outcome of the above process can invoke a separate process to have their appeal reviewed by independent Appeals Scrutineers. These Scrutineers are independent of the Department.

The Independent Appeals Scrutineers will check to ensure the correct procedures were followed throughout the appeals process. The Scrutineers will have access to the records and documentation considered at Stages 1 and 2.

Students who consider that their case has not been processed correctly can make a complaint to the Ombudsman or, in the case of students under 18 years of age, the Ombudsman for Children.

If following the appeals process students remain dissatisfied with the outcome, students will be able to sit the 2020 written Leaving Certificate exams. Subject to health advice, these will begin on 16 November. Further details about these exams will be provided by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) at a later stage. Those who sit the examinations will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the Calculated Grade and the written exam.

69. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Education the guidelines for the teaching of the practical aspects of geography, including field work; when she plans to publish guidelines relating to the issue; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24217/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Leaving Certificate Geographical Investigation accounts for 20% of the overall marks for Leaving Certificate Geography. The purpose of the investigation is to allow students to experience the practical application of the core geographical skills that are central to all units of the syllabus including physical, regional, human and economic geography. Students are required to identify aims, objectives and hypotheses for their investigation, select and use methods of collection and gathering appropriate to the chosen investigation topic, analyse and interpret results, draw valid conclusions and prepare a report.

The topic for the investigation must be chosen from an annual list of prescribed topics issued from the State Examinations Commission. The list of prescribed topics is prepared to ensure that the range of topics relate to as many of the units of the syllabus as possible including physical, regional, human and economic geography. This broad scope also ensures that the geographical investigation is accessible to as broad a range of learners and learning environments.

Furthermore, the list of topics provides scope and flexibility for a broad range of approaches to the investigation which may include the undertaking of a field study or an investigation which may involve desk based research. The 2021 investigation topics include a study of changing land-use, impact of migration, a local environmental issue, geology in a local area, impact of economic activity and impact of erosion on the landscape. The collection and gathering of information for each of these topics may involve gathering data through outside the school vis-à-vis an field study, survey, questionnaire etc. Alternatively, data may be collected using primary and secondary data available from journals, databases, government departments, published reports etc.

Some students may have the collection and gathering of data completed at this stage and in such cases they should complete their analysis and write up their report. In cases where the collection and gathering of data has not being undertaken, the flexibility of approach provided by the range of prescribed topics should be considered when choosing a topic for the geographical investigation in order that the investigation can be completed in line with public health requirements and guidelines. Any activity undertaken as part of the investigation should be done in compliance with these requirements.

The Department has also published a series of guidance documents as part of the reopening of our schools. These are available on [www.gov.ie/bactoschool](http://www.gov.ie/bactoschool).

This includes guidance regarding practical subjects in post-primary schools. While this guidance does not specifically name Geography, the guidance provided in provided in relation to Science is applicable. The guidelines outline areas that may be considered when schools are making decisions about implementing the curriculum, while acknowledging that teachers are best placed to consider how to safely manage equipment within current public health guidelines as they may account for their own local context.

For example, the guidance advises that where the sharing of equipment between students cannot be avoided, each piece of shared equipment should be cleaned/wiped between each use and that group sizes should be kept as small as resources allow.

## School Transport

70. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Education if a review will be carried out regarding the provision of a bus escort for a child (details supplied) travelling to and from school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24231/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department.

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.

The purpose of the Department's School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children with special educational needs arising from a diagnosed disability.

In general, children with special educational needs are eligible for school transport if they are attending the nearest school that is resourced to meet their special educational needs. Eligibility is determined following consultation with the National Council for Special Education through its network of Special Education Needs Organisers.

The pupil referred to by the Deputy is not attending her nearest school and is availing of a concessionary seat. Bus Éireann has advised that the pupil requires a 2pm collection time and while there is an escort on the morning service there is no escort travelling on the 2pm service. School Transport Section has not received a request for additional escort hours for this bus service but will liaise with the school directly on this matter.

### **School Transport**

71. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Education if the 70 years of age limit will be reviewed for drivers in circumstances in which appropriate medical evidence supports this and if necessary on a self-indemnification basis by the drivers in view of the requirement for additional buses to provide socially distant school transport to secondary schools. [24235/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. 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.

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. 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 Funding

72. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education the number of schools in County Carlow receiving an ancillary services grant, in tabular form. [24253/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department provides ancillary grant assistance towards the cost of secretarial and caretaking services to all recognised Primary schools, approximately 43 of which are in Co Carlow

Within the grant programme, the level and extent of services provided is a matter for the school authorities who, through the discretion afforded by the scheme, apply their own arrangements for secretarial and caretaking services as resources permit.

## Special Educational Needs Staff

73. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education the number of requests received for additional special needs assistants from schools in County Carlow; and the number of requests that have been approved. [24254/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews.

As part of that responsibility, applications for the exceptional review process for SNA support are made directly to the NCSE. I will forward the Deputy's question to the NCSE for its direct reply.

It is expected that schools will review and reprioritise the deployment of SNAs within mainstream settings and allocate resources to ensure those with the greatest level of need receive the greatest level of support. Providing access to SNA support continues to be based on primary care needs as outlined in DES Circular 0030/2014.

Schools may apply to the NCSE for additionality where they can demonstrate that the current allocation does not meet additional care needs within the mainstream classes in the school. Applications for additionality arising from significant new or emerging additional care needs, which cannot be catered within existing allocations, will be dealt with by way of an exceptional review process.

The exceptional review process for mainstream allocations will be available to schools throughout the 2020/21 school year.

Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

A school can appeal the outcome of an exceptional review and details of how to do this are here <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/GuidanceSchoolAppealing-Exceptional-Review-outcome.docx>.

The NCSE received applications during the lockdown period. These applications were received before and after the 22 May 2020. The NCSE have provided the information below regarding applications received for exceptional review.

The number of applications for exceptional review received by the NCSE at 26 August 2020 was 1080 and over 1060 applications has been processed. The number of schools who had re-

ceived an increased SNA allocation was over 550. As part of the exceptional review process, SENOs will be making visits to schools which commenced with schools reopening.

### **School Facilities**

74. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education the number of primary and secondary schools in County Carlow without hot water facilities; and the steps taken to rectify such issues in view of the fact children have returned to school. [24255/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The specific information requested by the Deputy regarding the number of primary and secondary schools in County Carlow that do not have access to hot water is not readily available within my Department.

Health guidance states that, while warm running water is preferable for handwashing, 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. Hand-sanitisers in key areas in every school in the country, as well as in every classroom, are being provided. To enable the supply of sanitiser fluid for each school, a drawdown framework for use by schools to purchase sanitiser, etc., (as well as other potential PPE requirements) is in place and all schools have been advised accordingly.

### **Minor Works Scheme**

75. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education the qualifying criteria for schools to be eligible to receive the minor works grant; the schools in receipt of the grant in County Carlow; the reason schools were denied a grant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24256/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Under Project Ireland 2040 the Minor Works Grant (MWG) is paid to primary schools in either December or January of each school year.

This year, due to the exceptional circumstances arising from COVID-19, €29m was paid under the Minor Works Grant to primary schools in the free scheme in July 2020. There was also an additional funding of €75m under the July Stimulus programme allocated to cover an enhanced Minor Works Grant at Primary and a once off Minor Works Grant at Post-Primary schools. To date approximately €71m of these grants have issued to schools.

Schools outside of the free scheme are not automatically covered by the Minor Works Grant or the enhanced MWG. My Department recognises that there might be limited circumstances where fee-charging schools may require some support to implement necessary reconfiguration works envisaged under the 'Roadmap for the Full Return to Schools'. In all circumstances schools are required to clearly demonstrate their difficulties in implementing necessary control measures and how the provision of additional support will help to overcome those particular difficulties. Schools can contact the Department at [reopeningschools@education.gov.ie](mailto:reopeningschools@education.gov.ie) if they

wish to make an application. Each application received by the Department is considered on a case-by-case basis.

A list of the schools in Carlow that have received the MWG is set out below:

Carlow schools in receipt of Minor Works Grant (MWG)

Roll number	School name
00651R	BORRIS MXD NS
00977B	BALLYCONNELL
01116A	BAILE AN CHUILINN NS
01215C	NEWTOWN DUNLECKNEY MXD
01415K	RATHOE NS
02124E	SCOIL NAIS MOLAISE
04077I	ST BRIGID'S N.S.
09320Q	DRUMFEIGH NS
11135K	ST MARY'S NS
13105L	ST BRIDGETS MONASTERY
13507I	TULLOW NS
13607M	ST COLUMBAS NS
14837L	SCOIL PEADAR AGUS PÓL
16080N	MONASTERY BOYS SCHOOL
16938E	FR CULLEN MEMORIAL NS
17053P	BISHOP FOLEY MEMORIAL SCHOOL
17096K	S N NMH FHINGIN
17127S	ST JOSEPHS NS
17462J	SCOIL NAIS MHICIL
17481N	ST BRENDANS NATIONAL SCHOOL
17501Q	BENNEKERRY NS
17514C	S N CLUAIN NA GALL
17617M	SCOIL CHOMHGAIN NAOFA
17663T	SCOIL PADRAIG NAOFA
17669I	S N TREASA NAOMHA
17756D	BALLINABRANNA MXD NS
17796P	OUR LADYS NATIONAL SCHOOL NURNEY
17994T	SN FHOIRCHEIRN/FHININ
18024N	S N NA MAIGHDINE
18183K	QUEEN OF UNIVERSE NS
18265M	BHRIDE NS
18363M	SCOIL MHUIRE GAN SMAL
18424G	ST JOSEPH'S BNS
18510W	SCOIL NAISIUNTA NAOMH PADRAIG
18609S	SN FIONTAIN NAOFA
18615N	CARLOW NATIONAL SCHOOL
19315G	ST LASERIANS SPECIAL SCHOOL
19477J	HOLY FAMILY BNS

Roll number	School name
19478L	HOLY FAMILY GNS
19784S	ST LASERIAN'S MXD NS
19811S	GS EOGHAN UI THUAIRISE
19958C	ST FIACC'S NS
20295K	CARLOW TOWN EDUCATE TOGETHER NS
20370V	SAPLINGS CARLOW SPECIAL SCHOOL
61120E	ST MARYS ACADEMY, STATION ROAD
61130H	COLAISTE MHUIRE CARLOW, KNOCKBEG
61140K	ST LEOS COLLEGE
61141M	PRESENTATION COLLEGE, ASKEA
61150N	PRESENTATION/DE LA SALLE CARLOW, MHUINE BHEAG
70400L	BORRIS VS
70410O	COLAISTE EOIN HACKETSTOWN
70420R	TYNDALL COLLEGE
70430U	VOCATIONAL SCHOOL MUINEBEAG
70440A	GAELCHOLAISTE CHEATHARLACH
91356F	TULLOW COMMUNITY SCHOOL

### School Accommodation

76. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education the cost of installing portacabins for the 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 school year by county, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24267/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The information requested by the Deputy is contained in the attached spreadsheet. The costs are VAT inclusive annual rental figures, on a County-by-County basis, of all new rental contracts which commenced in 2019 and 2020.

My Department continues to take an integrated approach with the Prefab Replacement Programme through the replacement of prefabricated units as part of large-scale and devolved projects, or as part of new projects approved under the Additional Accommodation scheme. This integrated approach helps to streamline the delivery of projects for schools.

County	VAT inclusive Annual Rental (2019)	VAT inclusive Annual Rental (2020)
Carlow	131,428.60	0
Cavan	41,254.20	25,584.00
Clare	36,096.00	0
Cork	639,852.80	151,394.04
Donegal	90,055.78	24,440.00
Dublin	647,019.86	149,199.00
Galway	159,176.70	42,213.70
Kerry	32,363.76	25,583.76
Kildare	386,526.60	39,335.00

County	VAT inclusive Annual Rental (2019)	VAT inclusive Annual Rental (2020)
Kilkenny	64,536.30	64,413.53
Laois	291,967.56	36,904.92
Leitrim	0	21,106.80
Limerick	150,692.80	0
Longford	34,538.40	26,543.40
Louth	230,906.68	0
Mayo	104,254.60	23,345.40
Meath	184,761.30	0
Monaghan	55,325.00	0
Offaly	50,336.52	31,980.00
Roscommon	22,066.20	0
Sligo	117,248.52	30,310.00
Tipperary	171,920.67	0
Waterford	180,543.92	87,433.32
Westmeath	120,997.88	0
Wexford	0	37,672.44
Wicklow	227,377.80	37,672.44

### Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

77. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Education if provisions are being made in cases of children in direct provision and the potential interruption to their education if there are further outbreaks of Covid-19 in centres in view of the fact that if there is an outbreak the child must be removed from school. [24287/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department acknowledges that there will be cases where individual pupils or groups of pupils are requested by Public Health HSE to self-isolate or restrict their movements because of a case or cases of COVID-19. Schools should, at a minimum, endeavour to support these pupils to catch up with their learning on their return to school. In some instances, where adapted education provision is already being provided to other pupils in the school, it may be possible for pupils who have to restrict their movements to avail of that adapted provision. In the event of pupils being required to not attend school because of a partial or full school closure, it is crucial that all schools make every effort to support pupils' learning during the closure period.

The Department of Education has issued guidelines to schools on how to support pupils who are unable to attend school because they are at high risk from Covid-19. These guidelines on "Continuity of schooling: Supporting primary pupils who are at very high risk to COVID-19" are available at [www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/#additional-guidelines-and-procedures](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/#additional-guidelines-and-procedures). This guidance also outlines how schools can ensure that pupils who are self-isolating receive appropriate support to engage adequately with learning by means of adapted education provision. In some instances, schools where adapted education provision is already being provided by teachers in the school, it may be possible for pupils who are self-isolating to avail of that adapted provision. This decision should be made at local level by each school in the context of the needs and circumstances of their pupils.

*Questions - Written Answers*  
**Special Educational Needs**

78. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education if it is now policy for high functioning students with autism not to be integrated into mainstream classes (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24290/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Special classes are part of a continuum of educational provision that enables students with more complex special educational needs to be educated, in smaller class groups, within their local mainstream schools. They offer a supportive learning environment to students who are unable to access the curriculum in a mainstream class, even with support, for most or all of their school day.

Students enrolled in special classes should be included in mainstream classes to the greatest extent possible, in line with their abilities.

This should continue, however, the number of mainstream classes with which each special class student integrates should be minimised, in order to maintain pod grouping to the greatest extent possible, and to assist contact and tracing mechanisms, should this become necessary.

At primary school level this may mean each special class pupil integrating with one mainstream class only whereas, at post primary school level, this may mean special class pupils attending only those mainstream classes necessary for their subject participation.

### **School Transport**

79. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Education the details of the new school transport allowance which is payable to parents of children who are eligible for school transport but do not use this school transport due to Covid-19 concerns; when this allowance will be payable; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24294/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. 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.

Based on the public health advice published in early July, my Department had been planning for School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year to fully operate, but with additional measures and hygiene requirements in place. The Department had been engaging intensively with Bus Éireann in regard to the logistics for the safe operation of School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year. Funding has been provided to private transport providers who are contracted by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department to operate the School Transport Scheme services in order to meet these requirements.

Updated health advice was received from NPHET on the 18th August, which impacts on the operation of post-primary school transport services. This advice stated that for secondary school students on school transport, strict distancing should be ensured in line with that on public transport along with the wearing of face coverings.

The Department has been engaging with Bus Éireann in respect of these plans, in order to implement measures so that any services that can operate from the start of the school year at 50% capacity will do so and over the coming period all other post-primary transport services will be re-organised and additional services will be provided as required to allow for physical distancing.

Every effort continues to provide a safe transport service for when schools re-open. However, if parents decide not to avail of transport services they may request a refund on the cost of their ticket for the 2020/2021 school year.

For those children who are eligible for transport under the terms of the post-primary school transport scheme and whose parents decide not to use post-primary transport for the 2020/2021 school year, in light of the impact of most recent health advice, the Department will provide a grant to support them with the cost of private transport arrangements. Parents were asked to inform the Department by Friday the 4th of September if they wished to avail of this option.

Grants will be paid at the end of the school year following receipt of relevant documentation confirming the number of days the child/ren has attended school in the 2020/2021 school year. The grant is based on the distance a family resides from their school of eligibility, with a minimum daily rate of €2.60 and a maximum daily rate of €5.10. Grants are not available to children who are not eligible under the terms of the transport scheme.

### School Transport

80. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if she will request Bus Éireann to permit late post-primary school transport applicants to take up spare seats that currently exist on school services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24351/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of my Department. 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.

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.

The closing date for payment for the 2020/2021 school year was Tuesday 4th August 2020. All children who are eligible for school transport and who applied and paid by the deadline have been accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation.

The School Transport Scheme Family Portal was temporarily closed for applications and payments on the 20th August 2020. This temporary closure was necessary to complete the work required to issue tickets to families who at that time remained due to be allocated a ticket for school transport services for the 2020/2021 school year.

The School Transport Scheme Family Portal has now re-opened. However, parents/guardians making an application/payment at this time for the 2020/2021 school year are reminded that the closing date for payments for the 2020/21 school year was Tuesday 4th August 2020. While it is possible to submit a payment, payments made at this time are now late. Late applicants and/or families who pay late are not guaranteed a seat and will only be allocated a seat if capacity is available once seats are allocated to those families who applied and paid on time for

transport services for the 2020/2021 school year.

In addition, payments for Post-Primary seats completed or made after 4th August 2020 will be only considered when 50% capacity, required by new Covid19 public health guidelines, is achieved on each route. The timeframe for this will vary from route to route and may take a number of weeks to complete.

In the event of not securing a ticket where no capacity exists, or on cancellation, a full refund will be issued.

### **School Transport**

81. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if she will request Bus Éireann to factor five concessionary applicants who did not secure seats on a post-primary school transport route (details supplied) in County Kerry when rolling out the 50% capacity on this route; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24353/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of my Department. 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.

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.

The closing date for payment for the 2020/2021 school year was Tuesday 4th August 2020. All children who are eligible for school transport and who applied and paid by the deadline have been accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation.

Children who are not eligible for school transport, but who completed 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.

Concessionary transport may vary from year to year and cannot be guaranteed for the duration of a child's post primary school education cycle. Where the number of applications for transport on a concessionary basis exceeds the number of seats available, Bus Éireann determines the allocation of the tickets and refunds payments made on behalf of those concessionary applicants for whom no seats remain.

The School Transport Scheme Family Portal was temporarily closed for applications and payments on the 20th August 2020. This temporary closure was necessary to complete the work required to issue tickets to families who at that time remained due to be allocated a ticket for school transport services for the 2020/2021 school year.

The School Transport Scheme Family Portal has now re-opened. However, parents/guardians making an application/payment at this time for the 2020/2021 school year are reminded that the closing date for payments for the 2020/21 school year was Tuesday 4th August 2020. While it is possible to submit a payment, payments made at this time are now late. Late applicants and/or families who pay late are not guaranteed a seat and will only be allocated a seat if capacity is available once seats are allocated to those families who applied and paid on time for transport services for the 2020/2021 school year.

In addition, payments for Post-Primary seats completed or made after 4th August 2020 will be only considered when 50% capacity, required by new Covid19 public health guidelines, is achieved on each route. The timeframe for this will vary from route to route and may take a number of weeks to complete.

In the event of not securing a ticket where no capacity exists, or on cancellation, a full refund will be issued.

## School Curriculum

82. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if she will add CPR and first aid to the senior school curriculum. [24360/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** There are no plans at present to introduce First Aid into the curriculum. The curriculum in second level schools must meet an extensive range of needs in catering for the cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social, physical and moral development of students, and in preparing them for the demands of citizenship, life-long learning and social and economic participation. Key messages arising from evaluations of the curriculum relate to overload, and the need to make more time and space for active learning and the acquisition of core skills.

The Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum, which is currently mandatory for Junior Cycle students, is focused on promoting the health and well-being of children. Teachers can include CPR/first-aid in their SPHE programme, however, it is not a mandatory component. Personal safety is currently addressed in a variety of ways in the primary and post primary curricula. For example, SPHE aims to develop student's skills for keeping safe and to make students aware of appropriate responses to various threats to personal safety. This provides schools with opportunities to prioritise first aid if they consider this to meet the needs of their students.

At Junior Cycle, the curriculum is made up of a combination of full subjects and short courses. Short courses are designed for 100 hours of engagement over the three years of Junior Cycle. Some short courses will be designed centrally by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and others by schools themselves or other bodies, using the template provided by the NCCA. It is therefore open to a school or other body to develop a short course in first aid training, for use in schools.

There are also opportunities within Transition Year in which a flexible menu of learning modules can be provided by schools within the context of a framework for the programme set out by the Department. As part of this, it is open to schools to provide first aid training if they wish to do so.

Schools are encouraged to engage with community groups and a wide range of stakeholders to provide for extra-curricular learning opportunities such as first-aid training or to give talks to students. It is the policy of this Department not to endorse any products or programmes produced by external parties for use in schools, irrespective of whether these are for commercial purposes or are freely available to schools. It is the responsibility of each individual school to select the materials and resources that it will use to support its implementation of the curriculum.

## Schools Building Projects

83. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the timeline for the tendering, constructing and opening of the new school on Harcourt Terrace, Dublin 2. [24361/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department is currently reviewing the building project to which the Deputy refers in the context of construction sites restarting and projects at tender stage progressing. Department officials will be in contact with the school shortly with regard to the next stage for this project.

### **State Examinations**

84. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education the statistical standardisation process used for leaving certificate results in 2020; if she will publish the data used in the standardisation process and the algorithm used; if she will address concerns expressed that some schools with a historically high level of better grades did not perform as well in leaving certificate 2020 in order to ensure that socio-economic status was not taken into account in other schools when assigning calculated grades; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24387/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The decision to adopt a model of Calculated Grades by my Department was a direct result of COVID-19, which prevented the state from running the conventional Leaving Certificate Examinations.

The design of the Calculated Grades model was informed by advice from a Technical Working Group comprising experts drawn from the State Examinations Commission, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills, the Educational Research Centre and international external expertise.

The focus of the Calculated Grades process has at all times been on the student and not on the system and my recent decision, announced on 1 September, to remove the school-by-school historical data from the national standardisation process underpins this commitment, ensuring that the performance of this cohort of students is not constrained by how their school has historically performed at Leaving Certificate.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order (the student's place in the class group) for each student's subjects. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school. Schools approached this task in a very professional manner, in line with detailed guidelines about the process, but inevitably some schools were overly harsh in their estimations while others were overly generous. This is to be expected given that there is no national standard on which to base an estimated mark. But to be fair to the class of 2020, the teacher judgements made at the level of the school had to be adjusted so that a common national standard was applied.

The process of national standardisation was applied to the school information in order to ensure comparability between the standards applied by individual schools and the national standard. This standardising process happens every year and would have happened in 2020 had the Leaving Certificate examinations been run as normal.

The national standardisation process has led to some school estimates staying the same; some being increased; and some being reduced. The overall data on school estimated marks showed that there was a very significant rise in estimated grades against what would normally be achieved nationally. This level of grade increase based on the school estimates would have been unrealistic. For example, based on the school data there would have been 13.8% H1 grades this year when in a normal year there is 5.8%. Even with the standardisation process the rate of

H1s this year is over 9%.

In the absence of the Leaving Certificate examinations in 2020 every effort has been made to make the system as fair as possible for as many students as possible. The statistical model used was blind to demographic characteristics (e.g. school type, student gender, etc.) either at the level of the student or the school. The standardisation process means that the same standard has been applied uniformly across all schools. This means anyone using the certificate to make a judgement between two people who hold this certificate, either now or in the future, can place equal value on the same grade in the same subject, without regard to where they went to school, as they would in a normal year.

The standardisation model has been subject to a high degree of human oversight by the National Standardisation Group with a number of safeguards built in to ensure fair results for students.

Technical details of the Calculated Grades model and standardisation process were published on the date of issue of the results and are available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2ed9b-leaving-certificate-2020-calculated-grades-technical-reports/>.

### Schools Site Acquisitions

85. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education if a site has been selected for a school (details supplied); when planning will be sought for the site; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24391/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** A potential site option has been identified and discussions are ongoing with the landowner with a view to acquiring this site.

Due to the commercially sensitive nature of site acquisitions generally, it is not possible to comment further at this stage.

### Schools Building Projects

86. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education the status of a new school development (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24392/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The project referred to by the Deputy is at an advanced stage of architectural planning, Stage 2(b) Detailed Design, which includes the applications for Planning Permission, Fire Cert and Disability Access Cert and the preparation of tender documents.

A number of Brief Change requests have been received in recent years in relation to this project. The most recent Brief Change Request was submitted by the Board of Management and its Design Team in March 2020. On 9th April 2020 an approval in principle to this Brief Change Request, which is subject to further clarifications from the Design Team and Galway County Council, issued from the Department.

The Design Team is currently working on completing a revised Stage 2(b) report incorporating the above Brief Change into the tender documentation. As soon as this is complete the report will be submitted to the Department for review. The Department expects this report to be submitted shortly.

Upon receipt and review of the Stage 2(b) report the Department will be in contact with the school regarding the further progression of the project.

### **State Examinations**

87. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education if she will introduce an appeals system for the 2020 leaving certificate students which allows the calculated grades given to be challenged; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24399/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The results of the Leaving Certificate 2020 Calculated Grades were made available to all students who opted to receive them at 9.00 am on 7 September via the Calculated Grades Student Portal. I would like to congratulate all students for their achievements in what has been a very trying time for them due to the impact of COVID-19 on their education.

The Calculated Grades Student Portal has reopened on 14 September at 9.00 am to allow students to view their estimated percentage mark and calculated mark. Students may wish to have access to and consider this data if they are considering an appeal of their Calculated Grade.

Students who are disappointed with the Calculated Grades they have received in one or more subjects will have the opportunity to submit an appeal.

The appeals process is a process review focussed on looking for errors in the transmission and processing of student data through the process.

It is not possible to appeal the information (estimated percentage mark or rank order) provided by the school. Due to the nature of the Calculated Grades system the professional judgement of the school is outside of the appeals process.

It should further be noted that the design of the statistical model and the application of the national standardisation process is also outside of the scope of the appeals process.

The appeals process has opened on 14 September and students can access this via the Calculated Grades Student Portal. Students will have until 5.00 pm on 16 September to submit an appeal.

The appeal process will include three stages:

Stage 1: Checks will be undertaken on the forms completed by the school and that the information was transferred correctly from the forms to the data collection system.

Stage 2: There will be a review to ensure that the data was correctly received and processed through the systems used in the national standardisation process conducted by the Department.

Data checks will include a check to ensure that the rank order of the class group for the subject and level taken has been preserved in the standardisation process and that students placed on the same school-estimated mark in the same subject and at the same level taken by the school are conferred with the same calculated mark.

Stages 1 and 2 will be taken together.

Stage 3: Students unhappy with the outcome of the above process can invoke a separate process to have their appeal reviewed by independent Appeals Scrutineers. These Scrutineers are independent of the Department.

The Independent Appeals Scrutineers will check to ensure the correct procedures were followed throughout the appeals process. The Scrutineers will have access to the records and documentation considered at Stages 1 and 2.

Students who consider that their case has not been processed correctly can make a complaint to the Ombudsman or, in the case of students under 18 years of age, the Ombudsman for Children.

If following the appeals process students remain dissatisfied with the outcome, students will be able to sit the 2020 written Leaving Certificate exams. Subject to health advice, these will begin on 16 November. Further details about these exams will be provided by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) at a later stage. Those who sit the examinations will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the Calculated Grade and the written exam.

### School Facilities

88. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the difficulties reported by a school (details supplied) in getting increased broadband capacity; if funding is available for this and other schools to expand such capacity; if there is a delay caused by a tendering process; and if there are multiple schools affected or if the issue is particular to an individual school. [24401/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Through the Schools Broadband Access Programme the Department provides for the supply of internet connectivity for all recognised primary and post primary schools, and some 98% of schools are included in this scheme. The Department's High Speed Broadband Programme, provides all recognised post-primary schools, high speed broadband with a minimum broadband speed of 100mbs. There are 58 special schools also included in this programme, managed for the Department by HEAnet.

The primary broadband scheme operates off existing infrastructure on the whole and the providers on the Primary Broadband Framework access this infrastructure to deliver the service to the schools. The Department does not put in place such infrastructure. The policy of my Department is to offer the best quality connectivity to all schools in line with the technical solutions available in the market and financial constraints. Broadband capacity can vary due to geographical location and local infrastructure, and thus impact on the service that can be provided.

The post-primary school referred to by the Deputy has a high speed broadband connection of 100 Mbp/s which is uncontended and symmetrical, meaning this is a dedicated service to the school. Given that this is an uncontended service; the school should have 100Mb/s connectivity. Schools are advised to contact the Broadband service desk In the first instance, in order to rule out any issues with the internal infrastructure of the school, be it the wireless or wired network and also to record their bandwidth upgrade request as appropriate. The Department's dedicated broadband service desk which is managed on its behalf by the Professional Development Service for Teachers - Technology in Education can be contacted by phoning 1800334466.

HEAnet is currently conducting an extensive upgrade programme for post primary schools as a result of which some 47% of schools have been upgraded to speeds greater than 200Mbp/s. A further 380 post-primary schools are now due to be upgraded, and on completion of this process, over 80% of schools will have a connection of 200 Mbps/s or higher. The school referred is included in this cohort due for upgrade over the coming school year.

The delivery of high quality internet connectivity for all schools is a key objective of my Department. Good school connectivity is essential for the embedding of technologies in teach-

ing and learning and for the implementation of new subjects like Computer Science. Currently, my Department spends some €13m on the provision of internet connectivity to schools annually.

### **Schools Building Projects**

89. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education when a tender (details supplied) will be published on e-tenders. [24404/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The building project referred to by the Deputy is being delivered under my Department's Design and Build Programme which tenders to pre-established frameworks of D&B contractors.

The Deputy will be aware that planning permission has been secured for the project and the Departments Project Management team are currently working on the preparation of the tender documents for the tender and appointment of a Contractor.

In addition, many of the planning conditions attached to the planing permission require the specification and constrution of a significant road network to make the school sites accessible. This road will be delivered by a third party developer. My Department has liaised with the Local Authority and is currently engaged with the third party developer in preparation of a coordinated set of specifications and construction programme which, in accordance with the planning conditions, will be required to be agreed with the Local Authority prior to commencement of construction on-site for either the roads or the schools.

In parallel with this process, my Department is currently at the second stage of putting in place the required Framework of Design and Build Contractors to which Design and Build projects can be tendered. Once that framework is established, it is intended that the project for the Carrigtwohill campus will be tendered directly to that framework as early as possible in quarter one of 2021. This process does not require a further tender notice on the etenders website.

The ETB and the school authorities will be kept informed as these parallel processes are progressed.

### **School Transport**

90. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education if parents can access the new allowance for driving their children to school if in receipt of a concessionary bus ticket; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24430/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. 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.

Based on the public health advice published in early July, my Department had been planning

for School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year to fully operate, but with additional measures and hygiene requirements in place. The Department had been engaging intensively with Bus Éireann in regard to the logistics for the safe operation of School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year. Funding has been provided to private transport providers who are contracted by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department to operate the School Transport Scheme services in order to meet these requirements.

Updated health advice was received from NPHE on the 18th August, which impacts on the operation of post-primary school transport services. This advice stated that for secondary school students on school transport, strict distancing should be ensured in line with that on public transport along with the wearing of face coverings.

The Department has been engaging with Bus Éireann in respect of these plans, in order to implement measures so that any services that can operate from the start of the school year at 50% capacity will do so and over the coming period all other post-primary transport services will be re-organised and additional services will be provided as required to allow for physical distancing.

Every effort continues to provide a safe transport service for when schools re-open. However, if parents decide not to avail of transport services they may request a refund on the cost of their ticket for the 2020/2021 school year.

For those children who are eligible for transport under the terms of the post-primary school transport scheme and whose parents decide not to use post-primary transport for the 2020/2021 school year, in light of the impact of most recent health advice, the Department will provide a grant to support them with the cost of private transport arrangements. Parents were asked to inform the Department by Friday the 4th of September if they wished to avail of this option.

Grants will be paid at the end of the school year following receipt of relevant documentation confirming the number of days the child/ren has attended school in the 2020/2021 school year. The grant is based on the distance a family resides from their school of eligibility, with a minimum daily rate of €2.60 and a maximum daily rate of €5.10. Grants are not available to children who are not eligible under the terms of the transport scheme.

### **Low Pay Commission**

91. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she has requested the Low Pay Commission to examine universal basic income; the current plans for the design, implementation and evaluation of a universal basic income project; the way in which external bodies and individuals can contribute to the design, implementation and evaluation of this project; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24357/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Programme for Government states that the Low Pay Commission is to examine Universal Basic Income, informed by a review of previous international pilots, and resulting in a universal basic income pilot in the lifetime of the Government.

This matter will be progressed in line with the Programme for Government commitment and a referral to the Low Pay Commission will be made in due course. The precise modalities for the design, implementation and evaluation of the project, including consultation mechanisms, will be determined by the Commission in conjunction with the Department.

## **Employment Rights**

92. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she has met or plans to meet with meat factory owners to address the concerns that have come to light due to Covid-19 regarding pay and living conditions of workers in their business; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24330/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Ireland has a comprehensive suite of employment rights legislation that protects all employees, including migrant workers, who are legally employed on a contract of service basis. This is specifically set out in Section 20 of the Protection of Employees (Part-Time Work) Act 2001. Anyone employed under a contract of employment has access to those protections, including entitlement to the National Minimum Wage (NMW). The Workplace Relations Commission is charged with employment rights investigations and compliance. Where an individual believes they are being deprived of employment rights applicable to employees they may refer a complaint to the Workplace Relations Commission. The Workplace Relations Customer Service Section can be contacted at Lo-call: 1890 80 80 90 or via its website [www.workplacelrelations.ie](http://www.workplacelrelations.ie).

There is no specific employment right in relation to the provision of accommodation. The National Minimum Wage Act 2000 permits deduction for lodgings if employees are in receipt of the NMW and are provided accommodation by their employer. Individual local authorities are responsible for enforcing minimum standards relating to private rented accommodation.

Any misclassification of workers as being self-employed when their terms and conditions are such that they are, in reality, employees, would be a matter of concern. Such misclassification improperly reduces contributions to the Social Insurance Fund and excludes workers from their full PRSI entitlements as well as some employment rights protections. My Department is actively engaged in reducing the prevalence of the misclassification of workers' employment status across many sectors, including the meat processing sector. If a worker wishes to have a decision made in relation to whether they are a self-employed worker or an employee for the purposes of PRSI contributions, they should apply to Scope Section in the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection – [Scope@welfare.ie](mailto:Scope@welfare.ie).

It should be noted that occupational health and safety legislation in Ireland applies to all workers on a premises, regardless of employment contract status. The Health and Safety Authority, as well as the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has responsibility for inspection and compliance in that context.

I am given to understand that, as well as the options for individual remedies set out above, there is already a significant level of inspection and compliance work ongoing in the meat sector that should help to address some concerns that have come to light in this sector due to Covid-19.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment**

93. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the closing date of 17 September 2020 for pandemic unemployment payment applications will be extended to allow seasonal workers who may need to reapply after the summer period; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24219/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Government has giv-

en approval to keep the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) open to new applications until the end of 2020. The payment was due to close to new applications on the 17th September 2020. It is also open to those who were in receipt of PUP and who returned to work, to reapply for PUP, should they be made unemployed before the end of the year.

### Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

94. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason a person (details supplied) was awarded a pandemic unemployment payment and then subsequently had it withdrawn; the reason subsequent requests for information by this Deputy to the pandemic unemployment payment team have been declined; if there is an ongoing examination of the application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24249/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The records of my Department show the person concerned submitted an application for a Jobseeker's Benefit payment dated 12/3/2020. In this application he confirmed his last day worked was 28/2/2020 and that his employment had ended. His loss of employment was not due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The person concerned also provided a letter from his former employer confirming this information. A Jobseeker's Benefit payment was awarded from 12/3/2020. According to Departmental records, the person concerned withdrew his Jobseeker's Benefit payment on 10/6/2020.

The person concerned subsequently made an online application for the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP). The Department's records show the Deputy was advised that this claim was being awarded. However as the person concerned did not lose his employment due to the pandemic this advice to the Deputy was incorrect and this error is regretted.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### Social Welfare Benefits

95. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Social Protection the different social insurance benefits payees of each of the different PRSI class are entitled to, in tabular form. [24259/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The information requested by the Deputy, including the benefits available to voluntary contributors, is contained in the following table.

PRSI Class	A	B	C	D	E	H	J	K	M	P	S	Voluntary Contributions
Adoptive Benefit	X				X	X					X	
Carer's Benefit	X	X	X	X	X	X						
Guardian's Payment (Contributory)	X	X	X	X	X	X					X	X

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PRSI Class	A	B	C	D	E	H	J	K	M	P	S	Voluntary Contributions
Health and Safety Benefit	X				X	X						
Illness Benefit	X				X	X				X*		
Invalidity Pension	X				X	X					X	
Job-seeker's Benefit	X					X				X*		
Job-seeker's Benefit (Self-Employed)											X	
Maternity Benefit	X				X	X					X	
Occupational Injuries Benefit	X	X*		X			X		X**			
Parent's Benefit	X	X	X	X	X	X					X	
Partial Capacity Benefit	X										X	
Paternity Benefit	X				X	X					X	
State Pension (Contributory)	X				X	X					X	X***
Treatment Benefit	X				X	X				X	X	
Widows', Widowers' and Surviving Civil Partner's (Contributory) Pension	X	X	X	X	X	X					X	X

\* Class B and P - limited benefit.

\*\* Class M - limited circumstances.

\*\*\* Not applicable to former Class B, C and D contributors.

In addition to the above benefits, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment is available to employees who lost their employment and to self-employed workers who lost their income

on or after 13 March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Enhanced Illness Benefit, introduced from 9 March 2020, is also available to employed and self-employed workers for Covid-19 absences from work.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

96. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the anomalies affecting a number of Aer Lingus employees (details supplied) will be addressed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24268/20]

97. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection the benefits workers are entitled to claim when they are not working but are still on their employers' books and their employer is in receipt of the employment wage subsidy scheme; and the related hours and wage thresholds. [24283/20]

98. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection the benefits workers on reduced working hours are entitled to claim when their employer is in receipt of the employment wage subsidy scheme; and the related hours and wage thresholds. [24284/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 96 to 98, inclusive, together.

The Department has advised that subject to satisfying the relevant eligibility criteria, employees may claim casual (i.e. part-time) jobseeker payments or Short-Time Work Support payments for days of unemployment, even where their employer is claiming the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme for days of employment. The normal scheme rules and application processes apply, including completion of the relevant forms by the employer to certify days of employment and unemployment. Officials from the Department have engaged with the employer concerned and advised of this position. Applications for support from this date are being prioritised.

The position regarding any retrospective entitlement to jobseekers payments prior to the introduction of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme will depend on meeting the eligibility conditions, including satisfying the Department with regard to days of unemployment. There applications are assessed on an individual basis having regard to the facts of each case and the rules of the schemes concerned.

Any legal obligations that the employer may have to their employee as regards terms, conditions or entitlements of their employment, including pay, is a matter for the employer.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputies.

### **Departmental Data**

99. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the current HEO vacancies within her Department; the location and business units of such vacancies; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24293/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department, like all Government departments and agencies, is required to operate within a staff ceiling figure and a

commensurate administrative staffing budget.

The staffing needs for all areas within the Department are continuously reviewed, taking account of workloads, management priorities and the ongoing need to respond to new demands across a wide range of services. This is to ensure that the best use is made of available resources with a view to providing an efficient service to those who rely on the schemes operated by the Department.

There are currently 91 HEO posts that have been approved for filling in the following locations and business areas:

COUNTY	Total	Business Areas
CARLOW	1	South East Region
CLARE	2	Mid West Region
DONEGAL	1	North West Region
DUBLIN	62	Communications Unit; Digital Adoption Team; Disability Policy; Dublin Central Region; Dublin North Region; Engagement & Innovation; Estimates Unit; IS Services; Low Pay Commission; Regional Services Unit; Staff Development Unit; Special Investigations Unit
GALWAY	8	Business Analytics Unit; West Region
KERRY	2	Mid West Region
KILDARE	2	Dublin North Region
KILKENNY	1	South East Region
LOUTH	2	North East Region
MAYO	1	West Region
MEATH	1	North East Region
SLIGO	4	IS Services; Illness Benefits; SWA Policy; North West Region
WESTMEATH	1	Midlands Region
WICKLOW	3	Dublin Central Region
Grand Total	91	

### Pensions Reform

100. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on the need for some persons who work physically demanding jobs to retire at 65 years of age; and if she is examining the needs of the workers in this regard. [24375/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Programme for Government “Our Shared Future” commits to introducing a Retirement Payment for 65 year olds paid at the same rate as Jobseeker’s Benefit without a requirement to sign on, partake in any ac-

tivation measures or be available for and genuinely seeking work. I wish to assure the Deputy that I have made the introduction of the new Retirement Payment an immediate priority for my Department. The new payment will be introduced as early as possible for those who are retired from employment. Officials in my Department are currently considering the design of the scheme and assessing the necessary legislation, ICT system requirements and administrative processes required for the introduction of this payment.

The public policy and social issues in relation to funding a sustainable and adequate State pension system are complex. The Programme for Government also commits that a Commission on Pensions will be established to examine a range of issues including contributions, calculation methods, sustainability, eligibility and intergenerational fairness. The Terms of Reference for the Commission on Pensions are currently being developed and options for its membership are being considered. Proposals will be brought to Government in that regard as soon as possible. Once it has concluded its deliberations, the Commission will report to Government by June of next year.

In the meantime, the Programme for Government also sets out how the planned increase in the State pension age next year will be deferred and it will remain at 66 years pending the report of the Commission on Pensions. I will introduce legislation later this year to do that.

This Government is acutely conscious of the need to consider the sustainability of the State's finances. However, this is not the only consideration when thinking of the State pension age. The State Pension is the bedrock of the pension system in Ireland. It is extremely effective at ensuring that our pensioners do not experience poverty. The Government is committed to ensuring that this remains the case.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Back to Education Allowance**

101. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will address the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24383/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The back to education allowance (BTEA) is a scheme that allows persons in receipt of certain social welfare payments the opportunity to pursue a course of study, while still maintaining their income support, subject to satisfying a number of conditions.

The conditions include progressing in the level of education held by an applicant with reference to the national framework of qualifications. An applicant will only be supported to pursue a level of education beyond their current level. State support for education purposes is generally grounded on a student progressing from one qualification level to a higher one.

Applicants holding a qualification at tertiary education level (certificate, diploma, primary degree or postgraduate qualification) will not be approved for BTEA to pursue a course at a similar or lower qualification level.

I trust this clarifies the situation for the Deputy.

### **Foster Care**

102. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and

Integration if additional supports for foster parents are available (details supplied); his plans in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24207/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** At the beginning of this public health emergency, Tusla’s Chief Executive established a national crisis management team to ensure service continuity for priority service areas.

Services for children in care (including foster and residential care) were identified as one of these priority areas. Local social work team continued to provide services to foster carers and children in foster care throughout the public health restrictions.

The support to foster carers included fostering link social workers contacting all Tusla foster carers with regard to the children they are caring for and to offer advice, support and if required additional services to foster carers. Additional guidance was also provided to Tusla staff with regard to home visits and arranging contact for children in care with their birth families during this time.

The extension of aftercare and fostering supports (including the allowance) for any young people in foster care who were turning 18 years during the pandemic was approved owing to the levels of uncertainty with regard to securing accommodation and/or future educational options.

It might also be noted that a Tusla operated out of hours emergency fostering support service is available 365 days a year 6pm to 7am Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm and 6pm to 7am on weekends and bank holidays to foster carers. Foster carers can call the Emergency Fostering Support Service, the following types of circumstances:

- Where a child is involved in a medical emergency.
- Where a child in care has gone missing from care.
- Where carers are struggling to manage a challenging incident with a foster child.
- Where the placement of the child is at serious and immediate risk of breakdown.
- If there are medical consent queries.
- If there is an urgent query regarding the foster child’s birth family.
- If an emergency situation takes place within the foster family, such as a bereavement.
- If a child discloses a serious child protection or welfare concern.

All calls are dealt with by social workers based in Tusla’s national office and will offer advice, and lead out on a plan of action to mitigate any risks to the safety or wellbeing of the child/young person in care.

There is also regular contact between Tusla and the Irish Foster Care Association to update them on actions being taken and on any issues for foster carers that the Association had identified.

Should the Deputy have contact with a foster carer who has any worries or concerns with regard to their fostering role, I understand Tusla would be more than happy to support the foster carer with their query.

### **Third Level Admissions**

103. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the approach he will take to equalise the position of students who sat their leaving certificate in 2019 and deferred their CAO application until 2020 in view of both grade and course inflation arising from the Covid-19 and the leaving certificate of 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24239/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The CAO system is a system that works on the assumption that grades obtained in the Leaving Certificate by candidates determine their points. It is on this basis that the CAO system allocates places to applicants including those from different years.

For the 2020 CAO system to proceed to pave the way for entry to higher education for the majority of applicants within the current timelines, and in a manner than can be properly upheld, 2020 results and the results of leaving certificate examinations from previous years must be treated equally in the CAO system.

In order to help mitigate the impact of the changes to the grading system, I announced the creation of an additional 2,225 places on high-demand courses in Higher Education Institutions. These places have resulted in the highest ever number of applicants receiving a CAO offers, with 53,815 CAO applicants receiving round one offers on Friday.

Nonetheless, there were fluctuations in CAO points this year, as there are every year. These are dependent on the volume of applications, the number of applicants who meet the entry requirements, the number of places available and the grades received by applicants. As we are in the midst of a global pandemic and economic flux, there is more uncertainty than usual this year due to factors such as reduced opportunities in the economy, students seeking to defer or re-apply in subsequent years and uncertainty around students travelling internationally both to and from Ireland.

The full picture of the CAO 2020 application cycle, taking account of all supply and demand variables, will not be known until all places are filled at the end of the CAO process. My Department will continue to monitor developments closely in collaboration with the higher education sector and the Department of Education.

### **Third Level Admissions**

104. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his Department predicts a decline in the number of students travelling to abroad to study at third-level; the estimated increase in students accepting CAO offers as a result of a predicted decline; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24369/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** My Department does not collect figures on the number of students from Ireland who choose to pursue their third level studies abroad, and as such has no basis to make a prediction on the number of students choosing to do so this year. The number of students who accept CAO offers depends on a wide range of factors, such, and the full picture will not be known until all places are filled at the end of the CAO process.

### **Third Level Admissions**

105. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education,

Research, Innovation and Science the number of new university places made available as a result of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24388/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** In order to help mitigate the impact of the changes to the grading system, I announced the creation of an additional 2,225 places on high-demand courses in Higher Education Institutions. These places have resulted in the highest ever number of applicants receiving a CAO offers, with 53,815 CAO applicants receiving round one offers on Friday.

A summary of the additional places provided, by subject area, is available in the table below:

Subject Area	Additional Places
Architecture	23
Arts & Humanities	476
Business	430
Creative Arts	41
Dentistry	18
Education	170
Engineering	313
Law	142
Music	9
Science	220
Information Technology	31
Nursing	134
Medicine, Health & Physical	218
Total	2225

### Naturalisation Applications

106. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of an application for naturalisation in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24203/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** An application for naturalisation in relation to the person referred to is currently being processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision in due course.

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 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 is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

### **Immigration Status**

107. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of an application for residency status in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24209/20]

**Minister for Justice (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 (GNIB).

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 remain 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 is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

### **Immigration Status**

108. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of entitlement to residency status in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24212/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The person referred to is the subject of a Deportation Order made on 21 July 2009 and therefore has no entitlement to residency in the State. This Order requires the person to remove themselves from the State and remain outside the State. The enforcement of the Deportation Order is a matter for the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB).

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 consideration of these representations, a decision will be made either to 'affirm' or to 'revoke' the existing Deportation Order. In the meantime, the Deportation Order remains valid and in place and the person concerned must continue to present to GNIB when required.

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 from my Department is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

### **Naturalisation Certificates**

109. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Justice the number of cases in which naturalisation has been granted using section 16(a) of the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956 in each of the past five years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24230/20]

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

Statistics are not compiled in such a manner as to identify those applications where a certificate of naturalisation for citizenship has been granted on the basis of Irish association. The retrieval of this data would require a case by case examination of applications received during the timeframe specified and would represent a significant diversion of resources from day to day processing. However, I can say that there are currently 212 Irish association cases under active consideration by my Department.

It is open to an applicant to apply under Section 16(a) of the 1956 Act where the applicant is of Irish descent or has Irish association. Under the legislation a person is of Irish association if they are related by blood, affinity or adoption to a person (living or deceased) who is or was an Irish citizen or entitled to be an Irish citizen. A civil partner of such a person may also qualify.

In such cases, the conditions for naturalisation set out under Section 15 of the Act, including residency requirements, may be waived on a discretionary basis. As such, applications under Section 16(a) are only granted where exceptional and compelling circumstances apply, particularly given the other pathways to naturalisation available under the legislation. The onus is on the applicant to provide sufficient evidence of Irish descent or Irish association in the application.

Further information in relation to making an application for citizenship/naturalisation and the appropriate applications forms is available on the Immigration Service website [www.inis.gov.ie](http://www.inis.gov.ie).

### **Garda Operations**

110. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí who are part of Operation Tombola in relation to the use of illegal fireworks; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24240/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Deputy may appreciate that the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management and control of An Garda Síochána. This includes responsibility for the allocation of all Garda resources and as Minister I have no role in these matters. However Gardaí have informed me that the allocation of resources is kept under continuous review, in light of crime trends and policing priorities, in order to ensure their optimum use.

The Garda Commissioner has assured me that appropriate policing plans and measures are being implemented, effective since the 4 September, 2020 and that "Operation Tombola" will

remain in place in the lead up to and over the Halloween period.

Policing plans under the auspices of “Operation Tombola” include an overt uniform presence and covert element where appropriate. Local Garda management are engaged with relevant stakeholders, including with local authorities to identify, co-ordinate and implement an appropriate multi-agency strategy for the Halloween period.

Community Policing Gardaí will also liaise with various Community groups regarding alternative events around Halloween. It is important to note that this year the Community Policing Gardaí will be doing this important work taking full account of the implications of the regulations pertaining to gatherings in outdoor spaces made under the Health Act 1946, as amended.

The Deputy will wish to note that Operation Tombola also focuses on preventing associated public disorder and anti-social behaviour through the incremental deployment of resources, including Garda Public Order Units to augment local plans as appropriate and each District will prepare an Operational Plan to provide an appropriate policing service.

### Fire Safety

111. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Justice if her Department has recently reviewed the legislative provisions in relation to the illegal use of fireworks; if such a review is planned; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24241/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** It is important to be aware that fireworks, because they are explosives, are regulated under national and EU legislation and can only be imported into the country under licence and stored and sold in accordance with the explosives law. Ireland has particularly robust laws governing the importation and use of fireworks.

The Deputy may be aware fireworks are classified into four separate categories, depending on their level of hazard and whether they require specialist knowledge for use. Category F1 is the least hazardous category and covers party poppers and sparklers, while Category F4 represents the most hazardous. A licence is required to import any category of firework and because Government policy restricts the availability of all hazardous fireworks to the general public, licences to import anything over a F1 category firework will only be granted to professional and competent operators for the purpose of organised displays.

The penalties provided for in connection with firework related offences are severe. Under part 6 of the Criminal Justice Act 2006 having unlicensed fireworks in your possession with intent to sell or supply can result in a fine of up to €10,000 and up to five years imprisonment. Igniting fireworks or throwing an ignited firework at a person or property is also liable to the same severe penalty.

There is currently no review of these provisions planned but I would like to reassure the Deputy that my Department and An Garda Síochána engage in specific and targeted activities at this time of year to promote a message of public safety and compliance with the law.

It may also interest the Deputy to know that in addition to the power to make arrests for the possession of unlicensed fireworks provided for by Part 6 of the Criminal Justice Act 2006, a number of strong legislative provisions are available to Gardaí to combat anti-social behaviour more generally and include -

- the Criminal Damage Act 1991;

- Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 1994;
- the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 2003; and
- the Intoxicating Liquor Acts 2003 and 2008.

### **Cross-Border Co-operation**

112. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Justice the formal or informal arrangements for co-operation between An Garda Síochána and the PSNI in relation to the use of illegal fireworks; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24242/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, fireworks, because they are explosives, are regulated under national and EU legislation and can only be imported into the country under licence and stored and sold in accordance with the explosives law. Ireland has particularly robust laws governing the

importation and use of fireworks which the An Garda Síochána have the power to enforce under the Criminal Justice Act 2006. In addition to the provisions contained in the 2006 Act, An Garda Síochána have available to them a number of strong legislative provisions to combat anti-social behaviour more generally and include -

- the Criminal Damage Act 1991;
- Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 1994;
- the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 2003; and
- the Intoxicating Liquor Acts 2003 and 2008.

There is ongoing close cooperation between An Garda Síochána and the PSNI on all aspects of policing. While this close cooperation between An Garda Síochána and the PSNI continues all year, at this time of year, in advance of Halloween, a significant element of this liaison work focuses on the sale of illegal fireworks. I understand that information is shared between An Garda Síochána and PSNI at local levels and where necessary appropriate policing operations are put in place on an intelligence-led basis.

At a national level, in the run up to Halloween, additional efforts are made by An Garda Síochána to combat the illegal importation, sale and use of fireworks, under 'Operation Tombola'. Operation Tombola is a national campaign within An Garda Síochána which specifically focuses on preventing and detecting the sale of illegal fireworks. The campaign, which relies on Garda intelligence as well as high-visibility policing activity, also focuses on preventing associated public disorder and anti-social behaviour through the incremental deployment of resources which has proven to be operationally effective on a national basis.

### **Crime Prevention**

113. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Justice if regulatory checks are carried out of licensed sellers and importers of fireworks to ensure that fireworks are sold only in line with legislative provisions; the number of such checks in each of the past five years; the number of breaches found; the number of those that hold licences for the sale of fireworks here; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24243/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy is aware the importation of fireworks are controlled under law in the interests of safety and security. My Department issues licenses under the Explosives Act for the importation of all fireworks. However, the more hazardous Category F2, F3 and F4 fireworks are restricted and these fireworks can only be used in organised displays conducted by professional and competent operators. Category F1 fireworks which present a very low hazard, negligible noise level and are intended for use in confined areas including domestic buildings can be sold to the general public. These very low hazard fireworks includes party poppers, sparklers and fun snaps.

Before issuing any licence for the importation of fireworks my Department conducts checks to ensure that the fireworks are in full compliance with EU and Irish law. This ensures that only CE marked and safe fireworks are made available on the market in Ireland. Under this legislation the Minister appoints authorised officers who carry out inspections to ensure compliance with this legislation.

In the last 5 years my Department has issued 2,096 licences for the importation of Category F2, F3 and F4 fireworks for use in organised public displays and 23 licences for the importation of Category F1 fireworks for sale to the general public.

-	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Import Licences Issued							
Display Fireworks (Category F2, F3 and F4)	348	371	422	448	428	79	2096
Category F1 Fireworks	5	3	4	4	5	2	23

In advance of Halloween each year my Department writes to all known importers, distributors and sellers of Category F1 fireworks to remind them of their obligations with regard to the importation and storage of Category F1 fireworks. In addition my Department writes to representative associations such as Retail Ireland, Retail Excellence Ireland, RGdata and ISME to ask them to inform all their members about the obligations involved should they wish to either import, store or sell Category F1 fireworks.

In the last 5 years my Department has conducted a total of 84 inspections in distribution and retail premises regarding the sale to the general public of Category F1 fireworks and has noted 22 breaches of the legislation.

Some of these were in respect of the unlicensed importation of non CE marked Category F1 fireworks and some cases were where the retailer had not registered their premises with the Local Authority as is required under the Explosives Act.

-	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Inspections	44	16	6	5	13	0	84
Breaches of Legislation	10	5	2	2	3	0	22

Finally, under the Explosives Act any person who wishes to store or sell Category F1 fireworks must register their premises with their respective Local Authority on an annual basis and so the total number of such premises registered by each Local Authority would be available from that Local Authority.

### Crime Data

114. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Justice the number of reports received by

An Garda Síochána in relation to the use of illegal fireworks in each of the past six months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24244/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I have requested the information sought by the Deputy from An Garda Síochána and this information is currently being collated and verified.

I will write directly to the Deputy when this information is available.

### Crime Data

115. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Justice the number of seizures of illegal fireworks in each of the past five years; the number prosecuted in each year; the number of convictions in each year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24245/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I have requested the information sought by the Deputy on the number and value of fireworks seized from An Garda Síochána and the number of convictions from the Courts Service. This information is currently being collated and verified.

I will write directly to the Deputy when this information is available.

### Crime Prevention

116. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Justice the resources allocated to the public safety campaign in relation to illegal fireworks conducted by her Department in each of the past five years; the number of schools, youth or community organisations that have been visited in each year as part of the campaign; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24246/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy is aware each year as we approach Halloween, my Department runs an annual awareness campaign highlighting the public safety aspects of the use of firework and the illegality of selling, igniting or throwing fireworks, as well as the penalties that these offences can attract.

The campaigns in 2016 and 2017 were predominately newspaper based, however, from 2018 onwards have focused more on an online presence.

The 2020 campaign will be launched shortly.

The costs associated with this campaign from 2016 onwards are provided in the table below.

Year	Cost
2019	€17,840.81
2018	€29,090.89
2017	€36,676.44
2016	€34,680.70

The figure for 2019 includes spending on research into the effectiveness of the campaign.

In addition to the campaign run by my Department, at this time of year, special efforts are made by An Garda Síochána to combat the illegal importation, sale and use of fireworks under Operation Tombola.

Work undertaken includes promoting awareness of the dangers associated with the improper use of fireworks and of unsupervised bonfires through the use of the media, social media, school visits and information leaflet distribution by members and the Crime Prevention Officer.

### **Refugee Resettlement Programme**

117. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of UNHCR resettlement proposals that were received to date in 2020; the number of final decisions that have been made; the number of persons who have been granted permission to come here; the number of proposals yet to receive a decision; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24378/20]

118. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Justice if refugees from other war-stricken countries such as Libya are being considered for UNHCR resettlement here, particularly those with relatives residing here; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24379/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 117 and 118 together.

In 2015, as part of Ireland's response to the migration crisis in central and southern Europe, the Government established the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP). Under this programme, the Government committed to accepting up to 4,000 people into the State, primarily through a combination of the EU Relocation Programme and the UNHCR's Refugee Resettlement Programme.

To date, more than 3,350 people have arrived in the State under the first phase of the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP).

Most of the remaining people will arrive under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme Humanitarian Admissions Programme (IHAP). However, these people make their own travel arrangements, and so no exact timeframe can be given for when they might arrive in Ireland. My Department is committed to realising these commitments in line with our obligations under the programme.

Under the UNHCR-led Resettlement Strand of the IRPP, a commitment was made to resettle 1,985 people, of which 1,913 Resettlements were completed by the end of last year. A balance of 72 people remain to be resettled from Lebanon and Jordan to meet the full commitment. Of this, 30 persons had been interviewed and selected during missions to Lebanon and Jordan in 2019. They were unable to travel, initially due to documentation and health reasons, and subsequently the international travel restrictions in place due to COVID-19. On the advice of the Defence Forces, it was not possible for staff from my Department to travel to Beirut to complete the selection of this cohort in late 2019. A successful mission in March of this year to Lebanon resulted in the selection of about 220 people who are currently awaiting travel to Ireland.

Last December, a second phase of the programme was announced giving a commitment to welcome a further 2,900 refugees between this year and 2023 through a combination of resettlement and community sponsorship. In terms of resettlements, 650 refugees will be resettled this year, 700 next year, 750 in 2022 and 800 in 2023. The arrivals for the first two years will largely comprise of Syrian refugees resident in Jordan and Lebanon, along with a pilot group of Eritrean refugees resident in Ethiopia. Any decision to amend the existing criteria or expand the current agreement is a matter for the Government and the UNHCR.

So far in 2020, no resettlements have taken place due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other

international restrictions on travel. It is hoped to resume operations before the end of the current year and the IRPP staff in my Department are currently engaging with international partners to share a collective experience of how best to resume arrivals and the lessons learned to date.

### **Parental Leave**

119. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Justice her views on a matter regarding an additional three weeks of parental leave (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24426/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Parent's Leave and Benefit Bill 2019 provides for two weeks of parent's leave and benefit for all new parents in employment or self-employment in respect of children born or placed for adoption on or after 1 November 2019. This is to facilitate parents in spending more time with their children in their critical first year of life.

The Government is currently 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.

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, and related costs, will be considered as part of the Budget 2021 process. The support is paid at a rate of €245 per week by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

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 twelfth birthday.

This will be a matter for Minister O'Gorman to progress following the transfer of this function to his Department.

### **Addiction Treatment Services**

120. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if communication was made between him or his office, with the Minister of State Minister of State with responsibility for Public Health, Well Being and National Drugs Strategy on the topic of 12 Steps and other recovery support meetings prior to 1 September 2020 [24220/20]

121. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health when a decision was taken to regard addiction recovery support meetings as an essential service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24221/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 120 and 121 together.

The situation regarding COVID-19 has been, and continues to be, an evolving situation. COVID-19 is still having a major impact both here in Ireland and elsewhere. The measures in place and the public health advice have been adapted to the changing circumstances and this will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future.

The public health advice relating to Covid-19 is kept under continuing review by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and it provides advice to Government in line with the current epidemiological position.

The Government introduced new regulations for indoor events on 31st August, 2020 [(S.I. 326 of 2020) Health Act 1947 (Section 31a – Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 4) Regulations 2020]. The regulations, which state that events being organised indoors may have no more than 6 attendees, apply to social, recreational, exercise, cultural, entertainment and community events.

Clarification that drug and alcohol support groups were not included under this regulation was subsequently received from NPHE on 4th September.

I welcome the clarification that addiction support groups are not covered by the regulations governing indoor events. I would advise that support groups proceed with a degree of extra caution, as individuals with addiction problems are more vulnerable to the risk of Covid-19, and put in place strict protective measures.

### **National Drugs Strategy**

122. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if a publication date for the 2019 end of year review of Supporting Recovery, Reducing Harm has been published [24222/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The national drug strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, sets out Government policy on drug and alcohol use until 2025. The strategy aims to provide an integrated public health approach to drug and alcohol use, focused on reducing the harms for individuals, families and communities and promoting rehabilitation and recovery.

The strategy contains 50 actions for delivery between 2017 and 2020. The implementation of these actions is monitored through the national oversight structures, supported by the coordinated system of monitoring, research and evaluation set out in the strategy.

The annual progress report on the implementation of the actions for 2019 has been delayed by the impact of Covid-19. The report will be presented to the National Oversight Committee, which is meeting on 18th September. I intend to publish the report shortly thereafter.

### **National Drugs Strategy**

123. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the status of the mid-term review of Supporting Recovery, Reducing Harm [24223/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The national drug strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, sets out Government policy on drug and alcohol use until 2025. The strategy provides an integrated public health approach to drug and alcohol use, focused on reducing the harms for individuals, families and communities and promoting rehabilitation and recovery.

The strategy contains a 50 point Action Plan to be delivered between 2017 and 2020. Annual progress reports on implementing the actions are prepared.

The national drug strategy is a dynamic process, which is monitored through its national

oversight structures. It has the flexibility to introduce new measures after four years to address issues that emerge over that period.

The Department intends to carry out a mid-term review of the action plan at the end of 2020, in consultation with the national oversight structures. This will provide an opportunity to reflect on progress in implementing the strategy from 2017 to 2020, and to consider the development of new actions to address emerging needs and challenges.

The review will allow policy to take account of the impact of Covid-19 on people who use drugs and on drugs and alcohol services and to plan accordingly for the remaining years of the strategy. It will also reflect the commitments in the Programme for Government as part of a health-led approach to drug use and misuse.

### **Hospital Services**

124. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if a doctor will be assigned to carry out assessments at a hospital (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24228/20]

**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 to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

125. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Health his plans to locate a Covid-19 testing centre in Drogheda, County Louth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24233/20]

**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, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

126. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Health his plans to locate additional Covid-19 testing centres in County Louth or in east County Meath; if so, the locations in which the test centres will be based; and when they are expected to commence operations [24234/20]

**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, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Staff**

127. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health the staffing budget for Portlaoise Hospital in each of the years 2017 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24238/20]

**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, as soon as possible.

### Abortion Services Provision

128. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health if he will reverse the decision by his predecessor to alter the model of care for abortion provision (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24248/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As part of the Government's ongoing efforts to protect public health and limit the spread of COVID-19, the Department of Health and the HSE worked together to put new arrangements in place to temporarily allow termination of pregnancy services in early pregnancy to be provided remotely.

For the duration of the COVID-19 public health emergency, where the need for social distancing, reducing personal contacts and reducing the burden on medical practitioners are paramount, it will be possible for a woman to access a termination under section 12 of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 (i.e. before 12 weeks) from her medical practitioner by telephone or video conference consultation.

The arrangement enabling remote consultation will be reviewed once the public health emergency is declared over.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

129. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when pharmacies will receive the PPE, in particular surgical masks, that was promised by the HSE to keep pharmacy staff and their vulnerable customers safe from the potential risk of catching or spreading Covid-19 infection in the course of their working day in the pharmacy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24261/20]

136. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health when pharmacies will receive the surgical masks that the HSE agreed with a union (details supplied) will be supplied in order to keep pharmacy staff safe from the potential risk of catching or spreading Covid-19 infection in the pharmacy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24292/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 129 and 136 together.

My Department, in conjunction with the HSE, is examining the issue of the provision of PPE across all parts of the health service, including health service contractors.

I will keep the Deputy updated on progress.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

130. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health if a 14-day view of Covid-19 cases will be published by electoral division regularly (details supplied) [24262/20]

131. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health the details of all Covid-19 cases for the most recent 14-day period available by South Dublin County Council electoral division [24263/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 130 and 131 together.

Since the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) met for the first time, a commitment was given to collect and publish as much relevant data as possible while ensuring individual patient confidentiality is maintained at all times. While the nature and scale of the Covid-19 pandemic has been unprecedented, the collection of timely and comprehensive data has been instrumental in developing the health service response to Covid-19 and to the advice provided by NPHE and the Department of Health to assist Government decision-making in the wider response to the disease in Ireland.

Comprehensive national statistics, information and data about Covid-19, including a timeline of confirmed cases by date, is published on a daily basis on the Department of Health website at <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/department-of-health/> and on the Covid-19 Data Hub and Dashboards available at <https://covid19ireland-geohive.hub.arcgis.com/>. The published data are based on official figures provided by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) and the Health Service Executive (HSE).

All datasets, charts and maps are updated on an on-going basis and in line with newly published data. Data in relation to COVID-19 confirmed cases at electoral division level are updated on a regular basis. However, the Deputy should note that care is required to ensure patient confidentiality is preserved and that no potential identification of individual patients arises. As a result, the data relating to confirmed cases by electoral division is not updated on as frequent a basis as the other data on the Data Hub.

The Deputy may also wish to note that a range data on the epidemiology of Covid-19 in Ireland is also published in the daily report by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) available at <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/casesinireland/epidemiologyofcovid-19inireland>.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

132. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health his plans to make changes to the restrictions policy in allowing birthing partners to attend the births with new mothers in addition to appointments leading up to that in University Maternity Hospital Limerick; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24271/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I acknowledge that the current restrictions in maternity hospitals are presenting difficulties and this is hugely regrettable. However, it is necessary to reduce footfall in order to protect women, babies, staff and our maternity service as a whole.

Maternity hospitals have performed well during the pandemic and have continued to keep women, babies and staff safe. The fact that there have been no Covid maternal deaths in this country, and that we have had a low incidence in pregnant women, suggests that the current approach is working. However, we must remain vigilant as services resume and higher numbers of people attend hospitals. Maternity hospitals rely on very specialised personnel; should an outbreak of COVID-19 occur in a maternity hospital, the ability to provide safe, quality care would be severely impacted. It should be remembered that maternity hospitals care for fragile infants at the extremes of prematurity.

All maternity hospitals are challenged by the pandemic, but those challenges vary considerably. Decisions on any restrictions are therefore made, implemented and reviewed at hospital level.

Decisions to restrict visitors in our maternity hospitals have not been taken lightly. Manage-

ment and staff are acutely aware of the very important support provided by partners at the time of birth. I have been assured that maternity hospitals wish to facilitate this support as far as possible. In that context, I can assure the Deputy that restrictions, currently in place in University Maternity Hospital Limerick, have been minimised as much as possible and will be subject to ongoing review

### **Covid-19 Tests**

133. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE has ceased testing staff for Covid-19 at a company (details supplied) despite the fact that a number of night shift workers previously tested positive thus leaving day shift workers potentially exposed to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24272/20]

**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, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

134. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if funding is available for a community group (details supplied) to set up a visitation, phone call service for isolated and elderly persons in the community; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24277/20]

**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 to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Paediatric Services**

135. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if the newborn bloodspot screening test will be expanded from identifying eight rare treatable illnesses to 40 which is the current practice in Italy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24291/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The National Screening Advisory Committee (NSAC) was established in 2019 and has held three 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.

Ireland has traditionally evaluated the case for commencing a national screening programme against the internationally accepted criteria (collectively known as Wilson Jungner criteria). The evidence bar for commencing a screening programme should and must remain high. This evidence threshold ensures that we can be as confident as we can be that the programme in question is effective, quality assured and operating to safe standards for the population.

The Committee will evaluate submissions and provide recommendations on a case by case basis. A meeting of the NSAC took place on 17 July 2020 where the Committee considered;

- (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.

After the meeting the Chair of the Committee wrote to me advising that ADA-SCID should be added to the National Newborn Bloodspot Screening Programme. I have accepted the recommendation and advised the HSE of this decision. The HSE will now make the necessary arrangements for the inclusion of this condition in the list of conditions screened for as part of the 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/>.

I am strongly committed to identifying any opportunities that exist in this area and to their implementation.

*Question No. 136 answered with Question No. 129.*

### **Disability Services Funding**

137. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health if there is a fund available to finance long-term care for a person (details supplied) with an intellectual disability in a facility in the UK in which residents of the facility from countries outside the UK require funding from their Government in order to be resident; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24303/20]

**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 this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

138. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health his views on the urgent need for same-day Covid-19 testing for teachers to enable schools to remain and to allow for the continuity of care for children by teachers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24350/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** A comprehensive, reliable and responsive testing and tracing operation is central to our public health strategy for containing and slowing the spread of COVID-19. The HSE has worked intensively since the start of the pandemic to put this in place and I would again like to acknowledge the huge work undertaken in this regard across the HSE.

Capacity has been in place since early summer to test 15,000 people a day/100,000 people per week. The testing and contact tracing operational and resource model has been designed to flex up and down as needed. In recent weeks we have needed to flex it up significantly as demand has increased. We are testing more people than ever before, with over 71,000 tests completed in the week ending 12th September. The HSE has deployed additional resources to meet this level of demand, including the opening of additional community testing centres and mobile pop-up testing units, significantly increased contact tracing teams and increased laboratory testing.

We had seen improvements in turnaround times over the week ending 7th September. 85% of GP referrals received an appointment the same day or the next day - the median being 0.9 days. The median time from swab to lab result was 29 hours, now down to 26 hours in the last few days. In total, the median end-to-end turnaround time for negative tests in the community setting ranged from 2.0-2.1 days while median end-to-end turnaround time from referral to communication of a positive result was 2.3-2.8 days. I do acknowledge that the system has come under strain in recent weeks, with a very significant increase in demand experience last week which resulted in some delays. There was a record of 13,000 referrals to community testing on Monday last week alone, and demand remained high for the week and into this week. As outlined above, additional capacity has been brought on stream quickly to meet this demand.

It is critical that parents and teachers continue to contact their GP if they or their child has any of the symptoms of COVID-19. The impact that the requirement to restrict movements has while waiting for a test and a test result is understood. But it is essential to prevent any further transmission of the virus, protecting other children and teachers in school and the community more generally.

More generally, the HSE is now finalising a future service model for testing and tracing. This service model will aim to deliver a patient-centred, accessible, consistent and flexible service. This plan includes the recruitment of a permanent workforce which has already commenced, and a range of other service improvements which will be rolled out over the coming weeks to ensure that people can access a test quickly and get their result quickly. Transition to the new model is underway and will continue through the Autumn.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

139. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the availability the health Service has for Covid-19 testing with rapid results; and if this rapid testing could be used to screen partners of expectant mothers in order to attend pre-natal scans and births. [24363/20]

**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, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

140. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the number of Covid-19 tests taken in a location (details supplied) to date; the positivity rate at this location; the number of persons who failed to show up for tests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24371/20]

**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, as soon as possible.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

141. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health the number of inspectors from the Health Service Executive, Health and Safety Authority and Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine deployed to monitor whether pubs are adhering to the Covid-19 guidelines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24374/20]

**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, in respect of number of inspectors from the Health Service Executive deployed to monitor whether pubs are adhering to the Covid-19 guidelines.

I understand from the Department of Business Enterprise and Innovation that following the launch of the Return to Work Safely Protocol in May, the Health and Safety Authority assigned 67 field inspectors to inspect on foot of the Protocol following its publication and the economy reopening on 18 May. Since then, the Authority has taken the lead role in co-ordinating the cross-Government response to checking workplace compliance with the Protocol. The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation has advised that as part of the cross-Government approach, inspectors from the Environmental Health Service (HSE), the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine are also involved in checking compliance against the Protocol. They have also advised that the Authority is continuing to keep under review and reprioritise its inspection resources so that we can maximise numbers available for field inspection to check compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol and also to ensure the Authority's existing legal obligations are met across all of our many mandates. The Health and Safety Authority continues to complete inspections across high risk sectors, checking compliance with occupational safety and health statutory requirements and compliance with the return to work safely protocol. In addition, the Authority's inspectors carry out reactive inspections across all sectors where they have been assigned accidents or complaints, which may include businesses such as pubs and restaurants.

The number of inspectors from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine deployed to monitor whether pubs are adhering to the Covid-19 guidelines is a matter for my colleague the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

## **Covid-19 Tests**

142. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider fast-tracking Covid-19 tests for schoolchildren and teachers to enable quick tests and results; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24376/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** A comprehensive, reliable and responsive testing and tracing operation is central to our public health strategy for containing and slowing the spread of COVID-19. The HSE has worked intensively since the start of the pandemic to put this in place and I would again like to acknowledge the huge work undertaken in this regard across the HSE.

Capacity has been in place since early summer to test 15,000 people a day/100,000 people per week. The testing and contact tracing operational and resource model has been designed to flex up and down as needed. In recent weeks we have needed to flex it up significantly as demand has increased. We are testing more people than ever before, with over 71,000 tests completed in the week ending 12th September. The HSE has deployed additional resources to meet this level of demand, including the opening of additional community testing centres and

mobile pop-up testing units, significantly increased contact tracing teams and increased laboratory testing.

We had seen improvements in turnaround times over the week ending 7th September. 85% of GP referrals received an appointment the same day or the next day - the median being 0.9 days. The median time from swab to lab result was 29 hours, now down to 26 hours in the last few days. In total, the median end-to-end turnaround time for negative tests in the community setting ranged from 2.0-2.1 days while median end-to-end turnaround time from referral to communication of a positive result was 2.3-2.8 days. I do acknowledge that the system has come under strain in recent weeks, with a very significant increase in demand experience last week which resulted in some delays. There was a record of 13,000 referrals to community testing on Monday last week alone, and demand remained high for the week and into this week. As outlined above, additional capacity has been brought on stream quickly to meet this demand.

It is critical that parents continue to contact their GP if their child has any of the symptoms of COVID-19. The impact that the requirement to restrict movements has while waiting for a test and a test result is understood. But it is essential to prevent any further transmission of the virus, protecting other children and teachers in school and the community more generally.

More generally, the HSE is now finalising a future service model for testing and tracing. This service model will aim to deliver a patient-centred, accessible, consistent and flexible service. This plan includes the recruitment of a permanent workforce which has already commenced, and a range of other service improvements which will be rolled out over the coming weeks to ensure that people can access a test quickly and get their result quickly. Transition to the new model is underway and will continue through the Autumn.

### **Disability Services Provision**

143. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Health his plans to reintroduce full disability care services, including respite care in special needs facilities (details supplied); the measures taken to give additional support to families caring for persons with disabilities that cannot access full disability care services due to Covid-19; if transport services for persons with disabilities to disability care facilities will be fully resumed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24377/20]

**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 this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **National Drugs Strategy**

144. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the progress made on the National Drugs Strategy 2017-2025 in 2019 [24382/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The national drug strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, sets out government policy on drug and

alcohol use until 2025. The strategy aims to provide an integrated public health approach to drug and alcohol use, focused on reducing the harms for individuals, families and communities and promoting rehabilitation and recovery.

The Programme for Government endorses the national drugs strategy as providing a road-map to treating the use of substances as a public health issue and to promoting a compassionate approach to people who use drugs.

The strategy contains 50 actions for delivery between 2017 to 2020. The implementation of these actions is monitored through the national oversight structures, supported by a coordinated system of monitoring, research and evaluation as set out in the strategy.

The annual progress report on the implementation of the actions for 2019 has been delayed by the impact of Covid-19. The report will be presented to the National Oversight Committee, which is meeting on 18th September. I intend to publish the report shortly thereafter.

### **Hospital Equipment**

145. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health when the CT scanner at Portiuncula Hospital, Ballinasloe will be replaced; the number of times that it has not been functioning in the past 12 months; the period of time on each occasion; the alternatives presently in place at the hospital for CT scans; the cost of the alternative in the past 12 months; when the present scanner was installed; the date the warranty expired; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24384/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Equipment**

146. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the location and number of CT scanners which are due to be replaced within the public health system by replacement priority; the date the warranty expired on each machine; the most recent date when each machine broke down; the period of time it was out of operation; the number of other CT scanners in each facility listed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24385/20]

**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 the Deputy directly in relation to this matter.

### **Hospital Data**

147. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons and waiting times for an urgent and non-urgent CT scan at each public hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24386/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The information requested by the Deputy is being collated by Department officials and a deferred reply will be submitted within ten working days.

## Hospital Facilities

148. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health when the development of the new 50-bed long-stay facility at the Sacred Heart Hospital, Roscommon will commence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24390/20]

**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 the Deputy directly in relation to this matter.

## Covid-19 Pandemic

149. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if his Department, in conjunction with NPHET will consider revising or removing current Covid-19 restrictions at maternity hospitals that prevent spouses and partners from attending scans and other ante-natal appointments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24400/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I acknowledge that the current restrictions in maternity hospitals are presenting difficulties and this is hugely regrettable. However, it is necessary to reduce footfall in order to protect women, babies, staff and our maternity service as a whole.

Maternity hospitals have performed well during the pandemic and have continued to keep women, babies and staff safe. The fact that there have been no Covid maternal deaths in this country, and that we have had a low incidence in pregnant women, suggests that the current approach is working.

However, we must remain vigilant as services resume and higher numbers of people attend hospitals. Maternity hospitals rely on very specialised personnel; should an outbreak of COVID-19 occur in a maternity hospital, the ability to provide safe, quality care would be severely impacted. It should be remembered that maternity hospitals care for fragile infants at the extremes of prematurity.

All maternity hospitals are challenged by the pandemic, but those challenges vary considerably. Decisions on any restrictions are therefore made, implemented and reviewed at hospital level.

Decisions to restrict visitors in our maternity hospitals have not been taken lightly. Management and staff are acutely aware of the very important support provided by partners at the time of birth. I have been assured that maternity hospitals wish to facilitate this support as far as possible. In that context, I can assure the Deputy that any restrictions currently in place have been minimised as much as possible and will be subject to ongoing review.

## Emergency Departments

150. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health if the practice within emergency department units for next of kin or a chosen person to act on behalf of patients will be reinstated (details supplied); if a timeframe will be given for the reinstatement of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24403/20]

**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, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

151. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if he will review correspondence (details supplied) from the Health and Safety Authority regarding a business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24428/20]

152. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if he will review a response from the HSA (details supplied) to a business; if he will provide further advise requested by the venue hosting the business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24429/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 151 and 152 together.

The recently introduced regulations [Health Act 1947 (Section 31a – Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 4) Regulations 2020] - which state that events being organised may have no more than groups of 6 attendees indoors and 15 outdoors - apply to social, recreational, exercise, cultural, entertainment and community events.

The NPHE has recommended that other types of gatherings, which are not covered by the Regulations, could be permitted to go ahead with up to a maximum of 50 people, in line with public health guidance relating to physical distancing and other protective measures.

I would like to draw the Deputy's attention to the "Return to Work Safely Protocol" [https://www.hsa.ie/eng/topics/covid-19/covid-19\\_coronavirus.html](https://www.hsa.ie/eng/topics/covid-19/covid-19_coronavirus.html), which provides clear guidance to employers and to employees on the measures that must be taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. The Protocol is mandatory, and it applies to all workplaces right across the economy.

The Health and Safety Authority (HSA) is tasked with providing advice and support to employers and employees on what and how COVID-19 measures are applied in the workplace. My Department does not have statutory responsibility for the HSA, therefore the views of the HSA in relation to the health and safety aspects of covid-19 are a matter for the Department of Business Enterprise and Innovation.

Guidance on the matter raised by the Deputy should be sought from the HSA Helpline which can be contacted at 1890 289 389 or [wcu@hsa.ie](mailto:wcu@hsa.ie).

Public health advice in operation at the present time is available on the Government website at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/cf9b0d-new-public-health-measures-effective-now-to-prevent-further-spread-o/>.

### **EU Regulations**

153. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the concerns of agricultural merchants who fear that their ability to prescribe and dispense veterinary medicines will be adversely impacted by the introduction of EU regulations in this area will be addressed; if he will consider seeking a derogation on the matter from the EU regulatory authorities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24211/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** 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 articles.

In 2004, European legislation established a requirement that all veterinary medicinal products that are intended for use in food-producing animals should be subject to a veterinary prescription. However, a 2006 EU Directive allowed for the maintenance of non-prescription status for certain veterinary medicinal products which did not present a risk to human or animal health or to the environment, and which met the specified criteria for exemption from veterinary prescription. Ireland availed of the exemption in Directive 2006/130/EC at the time and antiparasitics were allowed to continue to be available without prescription.

There is a similar exemption available under the new EU Regulation 2019/6. However, since that time, our knowledge regarding the impact of extensive use of antiparasitics has changed. For example, antiparasitic resistance has been widely reported in parasites of livestock species in Ireland and globally, resistance is developing year-on-year and is now a significant animal health issue.

In 2019, the Health Product Regulatory Authority's (HPRA) Advisory Committee for Veterinary Medicines (ACVM) established a Task Force to review the method of supply of antiparasitic veterinary medicinal products that are intended for food-producing animals against the criteria set out in Regulation 2019/6. A copy of the Report is available on the HPRA's website [www.hpra.ie](http://www.hpra.ie).

The Report states that the available scientific evidence shows that antiparasitic veterinary medicines that are intended for use in food-producing species do not comply with the criteria for derogation from veterinary prescription specified in EU Regulation 2019/6. It also states that a consequence of this determination is that any such products that are supplied without veterinary prescription will need to be upregulated to supply under veterinary prescription. Therefore, Ireland and all other Member States must now comply with this regulation from January 2022.

In accordance with existing national legislation, from January 2022 antiparasitic veterinary medicinal products for use in food-producing species that are supplied under prescription may be dispensed by veterinary practitioners, pharmacists and Licenced Merchant's. This means that all current stakeholders that are already permitted to supply such products will be entitled to continue to supply them in the future, however, from January 2022 onwards, a veterinary prescription will be needed to dispense them.

Livestock based agriculture is critically dependent on the availability of effective veterinary medicines. Increasing resistance to veterinary medicinal products threatens their availability in the future. It is imperative to protect the drugs we have available currently as it is not envisaged that any new drugs are imminent.

In recognition of the challenges posed to numerous stakeholders by the new rules my Department has established an Antiparasitic Resistance Stakeholder Group chaired by the CVO. Licenced Merchant and Co-Op representative bodies are members of this group. Two meetings have been held to date and a programme of work involving over 30 antiparasitic related projects is currently being developed. This group will examine all the issues with two principal objectives

- Protecting the efficacy of antiparasitics which are critical to the Irish pasture-based production model.

- Establishing a regulatory system that is pragmatic, retains a substantive role for existing stakeholders and delivers value for money for farmers

A 5 week Public Consultation process on the Regulations, hosted by the Department, closed in late July with in excess of 100 submissions received.

My Department is considering these submissions, and is fully committed to working with all stakeholders in considering how best to implement the new EU Regulations on veterinary medicinal products. There is a dedicated email address allowing communications on the new Regulation: [vetmedregs@agriculture.gov.ie](mailto:vetmedregs@agriculture.gov.ie).

### **Animal Diseases**

154. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if mandatory testing of Connemara ponies and cross breeds will be introduced to eliminate the threat of hoof wall separation disease. [24260/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** 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.

Research carried out by the Connemara Pony Breeders Society, in conjunction with Weatherby's has enabled them to test for the presence of the HWSD gene. My Department has allocated funding to the Connemara Pony Breeders Society under the Equine Infrastructures Scheme since 2015 to facilitate this project.

The results from this project will enable the Society to plan for the future and implement a strategy to manage this genetic defect identifying potential carriers. This should decrease the incidence of the disease with a view to eliminating it for the Connemara pony population.

The Connemara Pony Breeders Society has informed my Department that testing of all purebred Connemara ponies is mandatory and a prerequisite for registration of all foals born since 2016 and that all colts/stallions brought for CPBS inspection must have an HWSD test completed.

Untested mares (born pre 2016) are encouraged to avail of testing when brought for inspection.

All test results undertaken privately are published on the database with the owner's consent (GDPR 2018). EU law requires the Society to register all purebred Connemara ponies of proven parentage.

Regarding part-bred ponies, I am of the view that a programme designed to reduce the incidence should be concentrated on the purebred population where proper ancestry records have been recorded and breed make-up can be determined.

### **Animal Carcase Disposal**

155. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of fallen animals notified to his Department in each year since 2016; the role of his Department in monitoring the emergency slaughter of these animals; the number of fallen animals

that enter the human food chain; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24354/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** A fallen animal is defined by my Department as an animal which has died on a farm, for reasons other than being slaughtered for human consumption or killed as part of disease control measures. The number of on farm fallen animal deaths as notified to the Department since 2016 are set out below.

-	*On Farm Deaths	Stillborn	Combined Total
** To 30 August 2020	171,245	33,726	204,971
2019	216,938	34,397	251,335
2018	253,829	40,791	294,620
2017	224,011	38,853	262,864
2016	232,524	43,131	275,655

On farm animals may be euthanized by an approved animal collector (knackery), a private veterinary practitioner or by a competent person. The Department carries out ongoing monitoring of the fallen animal figures, as well as conducting a range of on-farm inspection. Where there are welfare findings, the appropriate enforcement action is taken.

Meat from on farm fallen animals is not considered fit for human consumption and is prohibited under EU Regulation 1069/2009 from entering the food chain.

### Basic Payment Scheme

156. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason the information previously submitted and accepted showing grazing rights for a 2019 basic payment scheme application by a farmer (details supplied) in County Kerry is not sufficient for the 2020 basic payment scheme application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24370/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In 2019, the person named claimed one hectare in respect of the appurtenant grazing rights. He already had enough other lands to cover his payment entitlements in 2019 so there was no over-claim. In 2020, he claimed 31.17 hectares for the same grazing rights but does not have enough other lands to cover all his payment entitlements. The Department has written to him asking him to clarify his right to claim these lands.

Notwithstanding the above, my Department is aware of a number of queries with regard to the right to declare the lands in Derrymore East. Therefore, I have asked officials to make direct contact with the person named in order to discuss the detail of the case.

### Proposed Legislation

157. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to introduce the Forestry Appeals Bill; the main provisions of the Bill; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24380/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** At its meeting of 27 July, the Government approved my Memorandum seeking approval to draft an

urgent amendment to the Agriculture Appeals Act, 2001 along the lines of the Heads of Bill presented. This will reform the forestry appeals process by bringing it into line with similar planning processes and is one of the commitments in the Programme for Government.

The Bill foresees the introduction of the following main provisions in the Forestry licensing appeals process:

- Clarification on procedures in relation to appeal hearings and other miscellaneous amendments in relation to Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC) conduct and operational matters.
- Provisions for the designation of one or more Deputy Chairperson(s) by the Minister.
- Provision for the FAC to operate in divisions.
- Introduction of fees for different types of appeals.
- Introducing provisions clarifying who may appeal directly to the FAC, without first taking part in the public consultation process.

I published the draft Bill for public consultation on 30 July for a four-week period with a closing date on Friday 28th August. My officials are currently reviewing nearly 9,000 submissions on the draft Bill received by the closing date. I am planning to present the final draft Bill to the Houses of the Oireachtas within the next two weeks if possible.

### **Animal Breeding Regulations**

158. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his priorities for improving the breeding and production of sports horses within Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24381/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I believe this is a sector that has significant potential to grow and develop providing increased returns to the economy My Department is fully committed to maximising the potential of the Sport Horse industry and continues to provide support to it financially and with policy initiatives. I have demonstrated my commitment to the industry by increasing the budget allocated to Horse Sport Ireland from €2.5m in 2018 to €3m in 2019 and a further €1m increase to €4.0m has been allocated in 2020.

My Department is committed to assist in the promotion and development of equine breeding and production systems in the country. This is achieved through working closely with Horse Sport Ireland. The sector has had tremendous successes in the Eventing discipline over many years with the Irish Sport Horse Studbook being first in the world rankings for 22 out of last 25 years. In recent years there have been major successes for our young horses in the show-jumping discipline in World Studbook championships with these horses excelling at international venues like Lanaken in Belgium. Building on the key principles of good breed improvement programmes and development of breeders to access young horses early and produce them early for their appropriate market, Horse sport Ireland have proposed the National Equine Production Pathway as part of their Strategic Plan. This programme supports horse assessments, health screening, young horse production and educational days for breeders. This is clearly a programme I can support.

My hope for the sector is for Ireland to be in the top division of the World Breeding Federation of Sport Horse Studbook ranking for show-jumping in 10 – 5 years, producing horses that

fit with market demands, properly produced for that market. I will continue to work closely with Horse Sport Ireland so that this can be achieved.

### **Brexit Preparations**

159. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which he continues to make contingency plans to meet new exigencies arising from the ongoing situation of Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24405/20]

172. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measures contemplated to minimise the impact of Brexit on the agricultural sector here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24419/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 159 and 172 together.

My Department's Brexit preparedness work has resulted in various supports being introduced over successive budgets to help the agri-food and fisheries sectors mitigate the impact of Brexit.

These include supports in the form of direct aid, as well as the provision of low-cost loans such as the €300 million Future Growth Loan Scheme. In addition, in 2019, my Department introduced the €100 million Beef Exceptional Aid Measure (BEAM) in recognition of a very difficult year for the beef sector and a prolonged period of price uncertainty caused by various factors, including Brexit.

The impact of Brexit on the agricultural sector will be kept under ongoing review. In this regard the recently published Brexit Readiness Action Plan confirms that further measures to support affected sectors will be considered over the coming months. I also welcome the Multi-Annual Financial Framework agreement reached in July by Heads of State and Government, which includes a €5 Billion Brexit Adjustment Reserve for those Member States and sectors most affected by Brexit. We will work to ensure that the agri-food sector gets an adequate allocation from that funding.

My officials and I are continuing with our Brexit readiness work, within a whole-of-Government effort, to ensure the best possible outcome for the agri-food and fisheries sectors. Over the coming months, this will include increased engagement and more focused communication with stakeholders around readiness for whatever outcome emerges from the ongoing future relationship negotiations.

Whatever that outcome may be, things will change, and agri-food businesses need to be preparing accordingly.

### **Agriculture Industry**

160. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which he receives opportunities for economic growth arising from further development of agri-business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24406/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The agri-food sector is Ireland's most important indigenous exporting industry, playing a vital role in the economy. 137,000 farms produce over €8 billion in output; and we have over 770,000

hectares of forest and over 2,000 fishing vessels & aquaculture sites. The agri-food supply chain stretches from rural and coastal areas all across Ireland to the UK, Europe and further to markets in the Americas, Asia and Africa. In 2019 Ireland's food and agri-foods products were exported to over 180 markets worldwide and valued at €14.5 billion, a 63% increase from €8.9 billion in 2010.

While the sector faces significant challenges such as COVID-19, Brexit, and trade uncertainty in general, environmental concerns, and future CAP and CFP reform; the sector also has many opportunities to develop further and prosper. We have a strong international reputation as a supplier of safe, nutritious and sustainably produced food. International consumers seek out our food and beverage products in what is a very competitive international market. We should be proud of this and work to build and enhance that reputation for the benefit of our farmers, fishers and all other stakeholders within the sector.

The agri-food sector has been well served over the last 20 years by having a series of ten-year strategies to guide its development and we have committed in the Programme for Government that this should continue with the preparation of a new strategy to 2030. A Committee of sector stakeholders has been working since late last year on this new strategy. Their terms of reference are to outline the vision and key objectives, with associated actions, required to ensure the economic, environmental and social sustainability of the agri-food sector in the decade ahead.

Last week, I met with the Chair of the Committee to discuss progress and spoke with the Committee members also, and I am satisfied that their work will make a very important contribution to ensuring the future viability and development of the agri-food sector. The Programme for Government has committed to publishing the strategy within six months of Government formation.

In the meantime, work continues under Food Wise 2025, the current strategy for the agri-food sector. Food Wise identifies the opportunities and challenges facing the sector and provides an enabling strategy that will allow the sector to grow and prosper. The implementation process for Food Wise is driven by a High Level Implementation Committee. I look forward to chairing my first meeting of that Committee this week, where the focus will be on our ongoing response to COVID and Brexit.

In the meantime I will ensure that my Department continues to assist the Sector through the provision of significant financial support from the CAP, the CFP and National funding. I will also ensure that its Agencies continue to provide support for research and innovation, for marketing and for investment where this is needed.

### **Dairy Sector**

161. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the degree to which he expects further economic beneficial opportunities to arise from the further development of the dairy sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24408/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Ireland's dairy exports performed strongly in 2019 with CSO figures for the year indicating a +12.4% volume growth and +9.9% value growth compared to 2018. I am determined to ensure notwithstanding the challenges facing the agri-food sector, especially in the current context of the Covid 19 pandemic that opportunities for the dairy sector to build on this performance are maximised.

Ireland is a global leader in the dairy sector in terms of the safety, sustainability and traceability of our dairy production on family farms, of our processing in facilities that range from global household names to niche cottage industries, and on our justified and hard earned reputation for quality. The quality of Irish sourced milk is a key competitive advantage in our promotional effort and allows the Irish dairy sector to compete successfully in demanding international markets.

Looking at the future prospects for Irish dairying, opportunities for growth in butter, cheese and yogurt are positive and are largely being driven by innovation in new flavours, product varieties, portion sizes and pack formats to meet changing consumer demands. Increased focus on health issues will be a critical factor for the future, and Irish dairy products will be well placed to meet consumer demand for healthy and sustainable food.

In terms of environmental performance, Ireland is rated as having the most carbon efficient dairy production per unit of output in the European Union, primarily attributable to our predominantly grass-based systems of production. Ireland's sustainability credentials, verified through Origin Green, are a key point of differentiation from our competitors. However, there is no room for complacency in this regard, and I know that there is a shared ambition from stakeholders in the sector for further improvement.

The Irish dairy sector makes an important economic contribution to Ireland's rural economy, supporting not just Ireland's dairy family farms but also in employment through primary and secondary processing facilities as well as wider ancillary service providers. As Ireland's dairy sector continues to evolve in the coming years, I am confident that the Irish dairy sector will continue to provide economic and employment opportunities across the rural economy.

## **Agriculture Industry**

162. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which he expects to be in a position to maximise opportunities for the dairy and beef sectors while being mindful of the need to meet carbon reduction targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24409/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Programme for Government, which sets a clear ambition around climate action, also explicitly references the special economic role of agriculture in rural Ireland.

Targeted supports for the beef and dairy sectors over recent years have focused on improving the economic performance of the sectors, while also improving environmental sustainability. The Beef Data Genomics Programme, for example, has made a significant contribution to improving the overall environmental and economic efficiency of the beef herd. The BEEP-S (2020) programme records the weaning efficiency of individual suckler cows, and also supports best practice in welfare management. The Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Schemes (TAMS) supports capital investment in measures such as low emissions slurry spreading equipment, an important part of the Teagasc Marginal Abatement Cost Curve.

Ireland is rated among the top performing countries in Europe in terms of carbon efficiency per unit of output, for dairy in particular. This is primarily attributable to our carbon-efficient grass-based systems of production. Ireland's sustainability credentials, verified through Origin Green, are a key point of differentiation from our competitors in the marketplace. However, there is no room for complacency in this regard, and I know that there is a shared ambition from stakeholders in the sector for further improvement.

## **Agriculture Industry**

163. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which he foresees marketing to play an even more significant part in the sale of Irish lamb, beef, pig meat, dairy and poultry products at home and abroad having particular regard to challenges arising from world trade or Brexit development; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24410/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The pursuit and development of new markets for Irish agri-food exports is an ongoing and central component of the strategic development of the agri-food sector as set out in Food Wise 2025, and is of particular relevance given the need to diversify our markets and to reduce our exposure to the UK market in the light of Brexit.

Over the last number of Budgets increased funding has been provided to Bord Bia in order to strengthen its understanding of consumer priorities and preferences in Ireland and in distant markets, and to communicate those insights to Irish food companies for use in product promotion, development, branding and marketing.

Trade missions also play a key role in market and trade advancement. In recent years, successful visits have taken place to Turkey, China, Japan, South Korea, Algeria and Egypt, among others. Increased market access has been achieved with these visits, including through the abolition of the age restriction on beef exports to Japan, through additional beef plant approvals for export to China and through the progression of beef access in South Korea. My Department, supported by Bord Bia, intends to hold virtual trade missions later this year, with Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia being considered. Destinations are selected strategically and in keeping with the Bord Bia market prioritisation exercise of December 2017.

The Government's focus on, and commitment to, new market development has been illustrated by its appointment of my colleague, Martin Heydon T.D., as Minister of State with specific responsibility for this task. In addition, my Department's international trade activities are being reorganised and further developed, as we deal with the twin challenges of Brexit and the Covid 19 pandemic.

More generally, my Department will continue to seek out and identify new markets, and I am of course ready to respond as appropriate to any opportunities that may arise.

## **Agriculture Industry**

164. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which he remains satisfied of the ability of the agri-business sector to develop alongside the need to meet carbon reduction targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24411/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Programme for Government commits to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030 (a 51% reduction over the decade) and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050. Every sector is expected to contribute to meeting this target by implementing policy changes, and the special economic and social role of agriculture and the distinct characteristics of biogenic methane, as described by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, will be fully recognised in plans to achieve these targets.

The agri-food sector has a strong foundation on which it can build to develop new practices, technologies and strategies to reduce its emissions. Many of these will also have co-benefits in terms of improving the productivity and efficiency of agri-food businesses, and indeed in terms of other environmental co-benefits. Taking a system-wide approach can thus improve their environmental, economic and social sustainability.

I am acutely aware of the enormity of this challenge for the sector and for this reason, I believe that the successor strategy to Food Wise 2025 can play an important role in providing a framework for helping to realise this ambition. The agri-food sector has been well served over the last 20 years by having a series of ten-year strategies to guide its development and we have committed in the Programme for Government that this should continue with the preparation of a new strategy to 2030.

The Stakeholder Committee established to develop the new Strategy are currently carrying out their deliberations. Their terms of reference are to outline the vision and key objectives, with associated actions, required to ensure the economic, environmental and social sustainability of the agri-food sector in the decade ahead. I have already met with the Chair of the Committee, Tom Arnold, and the Committee itself and I am satisfied that their work will undoubtedly make a very important contribution to ensuring the viability of the agri-food sector. The Programme for Government has committed to publishing the strategy within six months of Government formation. It also stated that the strategy should provide an ambitious blueprint for the industry for the years ahead, adding value sustainably in the agri-food sector into the future, and supporting family farms and employment in rural Ireland. There is also a commitment to ensure that, in addition to growing international markets and value-added export as a key priority, a strategic focus of the strategy will be on environmental protection, reversing biodiversity decline and developing additional market opportunities for primary producers, closer to home.

## **Agriculture Industry**

**165. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which he is engaging with agri-producers with a view to ameliorating concerns about viability and below-cost selling in the sector; the extent to which he is engaging with producers, processors and supermarkets with a view to achieving an equilibrium that is fair, positive and opportunity-creating for those in the sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24412/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Programme for Government includes a commitment to:

Ensure fairness, equity, and transparency in the food chain by establishing a new authority called the National Food Ombudsman (NFO) to enforce the Unfair Trading Practices Directive. This new authority will enforce EU-wide rules on prohibited unfair trading practices in the food supply chain and will have powers to enforce this Directive, penalising those who breach regulations. The NFO will have a specific role in analysing and reporting on price and market data in Ireland.

Directive (EU) No. 2019/633, the Unfair Trading Practices (UTP Directive), must be transposed into Irish law by 1 May 2021. This can be done by way of a Statutory Instrument, but any measures that extend beyond the minimum harmonisation requirements of the UTP Directive will require primary legislation.

Therefore, I propose to adopt a two-step approach to this commitment.

Firstly, my officials are currently drafting a proposal for an Statutory Instrument to directly transpose the UTP Directive as it stands. Secondly, the legal requirements for the establishment of a new Office of a Food Ombudsman are also being considered, including the requirement for primary legislation in order to give that Office additional powers going beyond those in the UTP Directive.

### **Tuberculosis Eradication Programme**

166. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which the bovine TB eradication programme continues satisfactorily; whether the industry is getting closer to elimination of the disease; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24413/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Following many successful years of reducing bovine TB levels to the benefit of Irish farmers, there has been a concerning incremental increase in the disease since 2016. This has continued in 2020 with further increases in herd incidence and reactor numbers observed. Herd incidence (on a 12-month rolling basis) has breached 4% for the first time since 2012 and reactor numbers have exceeded 20,000 – the highest number since 2009. These trends highlight the need for urgent action by all stakeholders to manage the risk more effectively across all transmission routes.

Whilst the immediate trends are disappointing and worrying, good progress has been made over the past decade. During 2009, 5,860 herds were subject to restriction whilst the number in 2019 was 4,060. By working together, we have made progress before and we can do so again.

I am eager to schedule a TB Forum meeting as soon as possible to further develop a shared understanding of how collectively we can reduce TB incidence. My Department remains committed to reducing and ultimately eradicating TB in Ireland as demonstrated by the recent sanctioning of an additional 16 officers to assist the TB Programme. Attaining TB-free status remains critical from a farm family profitability and sustainability perspective and from a trade perspective at national and at international level. I am acutely conscious that every TB restriction represents a significant challenge to the farm family concerned.

It is a deep regret that today over 2,700 herds are currently restricted which represents a 21% increase on the same time last year. I want to work with all stakeholders in ensuring fewer herdowners experience the challenges associated with a TB restriction and that we work purposefully towards eradication of this disease, thus eliminating this on-going cost on farmers and the State.

### **Tuberculosis Incidence**

167. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which various contributory factors have been identified in outbreaks of bovine TB nationwide; the extent to which the performance here compares with all other jurisdictions throughout Europe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24414/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Ireland has had many successful years of reducing bovine TB levels to the benefit of Irish farmers. However there has been a concerning incremental increase in the disease since 2016. This has continued in 2020 with further increases in herd incidence and reactor numbers observed. Herd

incidence (on a 12-month rolling basis) has breached 4% for the first time since 2012 and reactor numbers have exceeded 20,000 – the highest number since 2009.

The reasons why this is happening are multifactorial and often relate to local factors. The expansion of the dairy herd since 2015 has played a role in this, since dairy herds, larger herds, and herds which introduce more cattle, are all more at risk of bTB breakdowns. 52% of all bTB reactors in 2019 were in dairy herds, while there were approximately 2.8 million farm-to-farm cattle movements last year.

These trends highlight the need for urgent action by all stakeholders to manage the risk more effectively across all transmission routes. Cattle can become infected with TB in a number of ways such as

- Close contact with other cattle which are infected, including residually infected cattle from previous breakdowns
- Contact with infected wildlife, such as cattle accessing badger setts and latrines at pasture, or badgers accessing unsecured cattle feed stores within the farmyard
- Moving infected animals into a previously clear herd;
- Contact with other infected animals in neighbouring herds, such as across fences;
- Sharing machinery or facilities between farms

We know the risks that contribute to increased herd incidence from many years of scientific research. Risks must be addressed both by national policy changes and by actions at farm level. As we enter into the decade towards 2030 this is a pivotal year for Ireland's bTB Eradication programme and it is critical that, through working in partnership, all stakeholders take the necessary actions to reduce disease transmission, protect herds from new infections, and clear bTB from restricted herds.

Farmers have the power to reduce the risk of bTB spreading to cattle and can take a number of steps to protect their herd from disease along with protecting themselves from the stress and financial difficulties of a bTB breakdown. See [www.bovinetb.ie](http://www.bovinetb.ie) for information on ways in which risks may be reduced.

Whilst the immediate trends are disappointing and worrying, great progress has been made over the past decade. During 2009, 5,860 herds were subject to restriction whilst the number in 2019 was 4,060. By working together, we have made progress before and we can do so again.

Details of Bovine TB disease levels in other EU member states can be found at the following link:

[https://ec.europa.eu/food/funding/animal-health/national-veterinary-programmes\\_en#](https://ec.europa.eu/food/funding/animal-health/national-veterinary-programmes_en#).

## **Agriculture Industry**

168. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which he expects markets for agricultural exports to grow throughout the EU or elsewhere with particular reference to the need to replace ground lost arising from Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24415/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** De-

veloping increased third country market access and furthering trade opportunities around the world are both integral parts of my Department's response to the challenges posed by Brexit.

These goals are aligned with the strategic market development theme of Food Wise 2025, which outlines the significant opportunities for growth of our agri-food exports to new and emerging markets, particularly in Asia, Africa, the Americas and the Gulf region.

My Department has been, and continues to be, very active in securing access to new third country markets for Irish food companies. To that end, our food and drink exports have greatly increased in recent years. Total Irish agri-food exports came to €14.5 billion in 2019, an increase of 6% on 2018. Bord Bia has indicated that half of this growth has come from markets outside Europe.

Trade missions play a key role in market and trade advancement. In recent years, successful visits have taken place to Turkey, China, Japan, South Korea, Algeria and Egypt, among others. Increased market access has been achieved with these visits, including through the abolition of the age restriction on beef exports to Japan, through additional beef plant approvals for export to China and through the progression of beef access in South Korea. Destinations are selected strategically and in keeping with the Bord Bia market prioritisation exercise of December 2017.

The Government's focus on, and commitment to, new market development has been illustrated by its appointment of my colleague, Martin Heydon T.D., as Minister of State with specific responsibility for this task. In addition, my Department's international trade activities are being reorganised and further developed, as we deal with the twin challenges of Brexit and the Covid 19 pandemic.

### **Agriculture Industry**

169. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the degree to which continued emphasis is placed on animal health, husbandry and processing with a view to ensuring that the highest possible standards prevail and that Irish products retain pride of place on world markets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24416/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The National Farmed Animal Health Strategy 2017-2022 was launched in 2017. At the Strategy's heart is the ambition to shift the focus from response to and management of animal disease, to the promotion of animal health as a driver of optimised production, improved margins for producers and providing the best quality food for consumers. The Strategy recommends some 70 strategic actions, which my Department is taking forward.

The Animal Health Surveillance strategy sits within the National Farmed Animal Health Strategy. The aim of the strategy is to ensure Ireland maintains its international reputation as having a high animal health status whilst improving national on-farm productivity. State resources and infrastructure are deployed to enable effective and optimum monitoring and control of existing diseases and to minimise the potential impact for exotic diseases.

Food products placed on the marketplace are covered by a range of legislation designed to ensure that products supplied to consumers are of the highest safety standards. My Department plays a part in the enforcement of this legislation along with other Government departments and State Agencies such as the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) and the Health Service Executive. The FSAI is the body responsible for enforcement of regulations governing traceability, labelling and provision of food information to customers.

Primary responsibility under EU law for the safety and traceability of food placed on the market lies with food business operators. The role of National Competent Authorities is to verify compliance with this requirement. This is done via a combination of inspecting establishments and auditing the food safety management systems which operators have in place. These controls are applied at different stages in the food supply chain. Regulation (EC) No. 178 of 2002 sets out the general principles and requirements of EU food law and stipulates that food business operators must, at all stages of production, processing and distribution within their business, ensure food law requirements are satisfied. In regard to traceability, the regulations require that food business operators have what is referred to as the ‘one step forward, one step backward’ traceability system. There are additional requirements for certain fishery and aquaculture products under the Control Regulation (Regulation 1224/2009 and Implementing Regulation 404/2011) from first sale to subsequent stages of production, processing and distribution up to retail.

### **Farm Household Incomes**

170. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which farm incomes have fluctuated over the past ten years; the way in which fluctuations have been manifested itself in terms of impact on farm family incomes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24417/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Family Farm Income (FFI), the return from farming for family labour, land and capital, is the principal measure used in the Teagasc National Farm Survey. The preliminary results for the 2019 National Farm survey issued in June 2020 shows that the average family farm income (FFI) for 2019 was €23,934, a 2% increase on 2018 figures. Following a decline in the average income level in 2018, largely due to extreme weather, there was a recovery in average FFI in 2019. However, this recovery was uneven, with the average FFI concealing differences across the various farm types.

Family farm income varies considerably by farm system. Dairy farms are consistently the most profitable farms. However, it should be noted that almost all dairy farms are classified as full-time farms, with farms requiring 0.75 of a standard labour input being defined as full-time and those requiring less as part-time. Most cattle farms and the majority of sheep farms are classified as part-time in terms of labour input requirements, even though in many cases the farmers may not have off-farm employment. Around two thirds of all farms are classified as part-time.

Direct farm payments are a very important part of FFI, with an average payment per farm of €18,452 in 2019, or 77% of the average FFI. There are noticeable differences between farm types; estimates for dairy farms show that the direct payments account for 31% of income, while cattle and sheep farms are very reliant on direct payments and many would be operating at an economic loss without them.

A significant change in the methodology in the 2012 Teagasc National Farm Survey saw farms below €8,000 of Standard Output (SO) no longer included in the survey sample. Up to 2011 the threshold for inclusion of farms in the survey field had been €4,000. As a result, a straightforward comparison between the 2012 results and those of preceding years could easily lead to an incorrect interpretation of intervening changes. A further small methodology change occurred in 2018 based on data from the 2016 CSO Farm Structure Surveys and results from 2016 and earlier years are not directly comparable.

However, looking at the results between 2012 and 2019, and bearing in mind the methodol-

ogy change, FFI has fallen over this period with average FFI down 6%. Dairy farms have seen FFI increase by 35%, while cattle and sheep farms have seen FFI fall by about 20%. Tillage farms have fallen back close to the average of 6% across all farms.

The CSO's publication, 'Output Input and Income in Agriculture' shows that aggregate farm income or operating surplus has risen over the past decade from €1.8 billion in 2010 to over €3 billion in 2019. Operating surplus is defined and calculated by the CSO by subtracting compensation of employees from farm income accruing from farm output. The figure is comprised of the operating surplus earned by farmers and that earned by agricultural contractors. It is an estimate of income before deductions for interest payments on borrowed capital, land annuities and rent paid by farmers to landowners for the use of their land. It does not include income from non-farming sources and may not be equated to household income.

### **Agriculture Industry**

171. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the degree to which he continues to explore ways and means to maximise the value of products from the agricultural sector with particular reference to achievement of the highest possible standards leading to market advantage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24418/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The agri-food sector has been well served over the last 20 years by having a series of ten-year strategies to guide its development and we have committed in the Programme for Government that this should continue with the preparation of a new strategy to 2030. A Committee of sectoral stakeholders has been working since late last year on this new strategy. Their terms of reference are to outline the vision and key objectives, with associated actions, required to ensure the economic, environmental and social sustainability of the agri-food sector in the decade ahead.

Last week, I met with the Chair of the Committee to discuss progress and spoke with the Committee members also, and I am satisfied that their work will make a very important contribution to ensuring the future viability and development of the agri-food sector. The Programme for Government has committed to publishing the strategy within six months of Government formation.

The Origin Green programme, which provides proof points of environmental sustainability, from farm level to the processing industry, can contribute to securing a premium position for Irish food and drink in the market place.

In addition, at EU level, the EU Quality Policy aims at protecting the names of specific products to promote their unique characteristics, linked to their geographical origin. Protecting products with a Geographical Indication ensures fair competition for producers and provides consumers with reliable information on the place of production or specific characteristics of a product and can facilitate increased market value. My Department will be working to assess all opportunities for possible new Geographic Indication applications for Irish products. *Question No. 172 answered with Question No. 159.*

### **Equine Industry**

173. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which the equine industry might be negatively impacted by Brexit; the measures

in place or anticipated to address such issues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24420/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The UK's decision to leave the EU means that equine movement legislation that pertains to non-EU countries will apply, from 1st January 2021, to the movement of equines from Great Britain to the EU, including Ireland. The Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland states that Northern Ireland will be treated as if it were an EU Member State for the purpose of equine movement.

As of 1st January 2021, the section of the Tripartite Agreement (TPA) that allows movement of equines between Ireland and Great Britain without health certification will no longer exist. This is because the TPA is provided for in EU law in relation to movement of equines between EU Member States. Equines from Great Britain may only enter the EU if the UK is listed by the European Commission as a country that may export equines to the EU (the Commission listed the UK in this way in advance of the previous two Brexit deadlines of October 2019 and April 2019).

The possible implications of Brexit for the Irish equine industry are set out in a comprehensive information note available in the Brexit section of my Department's website.

In addition, my Department engages regularly with the equine industry on Brexit and other matters, including through the Equine Liaison Group, which is chaired by the Chief Veterinary Officer. My Department also engages with the European Commission to ensure that it is fully cognisant of the possible implications of Brexit for the Irish equine industry, given the close historic ties between that industry and its counterpart in Great Britain.

Separately, my Department is streamlining the application process for equine health certification, which will result in greater efficiencies as we deal with the challenges presented by Brexit.

### **Fishing Industry**

174. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the degree to which he sees opportunities to develop the fishing industry in the various areas throughout the country that are primarily dependant on the industry in terms of employment opportunities; his plans for the future maximisation of opportunities for such communities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24422/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department's €240 million European Maritime and Fisheries Fund Programme is the vehicle for fostering the sustainable development of our fisheries and wider seafood sectors. The Programme is expected to close in 2021 when it is anticipated that it will have successfully exhausted its budget. The Programme's strategy for developing the fishing sector over the course of its implementation since 2016 has been to focus on three priorities, namely (1) CFP Implementation, (2) Reducing the Impact of Fisheries on the Marine Environment and (3) Implementing the Small Scale Coastal Fisheries Action Plan. Implementation of this strategy for development of fisheries was supported with a budget allocation of €55 million. A key element of the strategy was to support measures that enhance the value of catch and that reduce input costs for fishermen. This was implemented through the EMFF Sustainable Fisheries Scheme which provided grants to fishermen for investment on board fishing vessels in areas such as adding value to catch, energy efficiency and enhancing quality of catch. Separately for inshore fishing vessels a dedicated Inshore Fisheries Conservation Scheme was implemented with a budget of

€6 million and offers grants for value adding investments onshore, advisory services, fisheries management, and for organisation of the sector through the establishment of the regional and national inshore fisheries forums.

The Programme for Government strongly commits to supporting the fisheries and wider seafood sector in achieving its potential, with a commitment to protecting the interests of our fishing sector in EU negotiations with the UK on a Free Trade Agreement. It commits to supporting the inshore fishing sector with greater marketing and promotional capacity through facilitating the establishment of a fisheries producer organisation for the inshore sector. Earlier this year, my Department published new Recognition Criteria and associated Guidelines for seafood producer organisations, which in particular specify new criteria designed to make it easier for inshore fishermen to meet the standards for producer organisations. Two inshore fisheries groups have since submitted applications and these are under consideration at present. Separately, the Programme for Government commits to continuing strategic investment in our fishery harbour infrastructure to attract increased foreign landings into Irish ports, driving the development of our processing sector, adding value to catch and creating jobs for our fishing communities.

A new Operational Programme for the period 2021-27 is presently under preparation within my Department and will be launched next year. This new programme will set the framework for supporting the further development of our fisheries and wider seafood sectors. Earlier this year, my Department conducted a public consultation to get stakeholder views on investment needs for the period 2021-27 and received a good response from a wide array of stakeholders. My Department also met bilaterally with key stakeholders to hear their views and that engagement is ongoing. The information gathered in that exercise, including on the opportunities available to sustainably grow the sector, is informing my Department's work on preparing the new Programme and will ultimately influence the design of support schemes for the sector, to be rolled out from 2021 onwards.

### **Agrifood Sector**

**175. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which the food sector in general and the artisan food sector in particular have been negatively impacted by Covid-19; the degree to which he expects to be in a position to identify such issues and assist in their resolution; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24424/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Like other sectors of the economy in 2020, the Irish agri-food sector has been managing the impact of COVID-19. The entire agri-food sector was designated as an essential service from the start of the pandemic, and kept supply chains moving and supermarket shelves stocked with Irish food and drink, not just in Ireland but across our European and world markets. The closure of food service during the lockdown had a severe impact on certain agri-food sectors. I am satisfied that the wide range of supports provided across Government, and by my Department in particular, have helped to alleviate the worst economic impacts for farmers, fishers and the food and drinks industry.

With specific regard to artisan producers, my Department provides funding through the LEADER Food Initiative operated by the Department of Community and Rural Development for artisan, small and micro food businesses. Eligible funding includes the renovation and extension of production facilities, the purchasing of processing equipment, as well as support in areas such as market development, competitiveness, and innovation.

In addition, Bord Bia has been very active in developing some specific supports for small Irish food and drink suppliers impacted by Covid19 to develop their businesses. Some examples include:

- a series of podcasts / Webinars for businesses
- in terms of engagement with Irish retailers, a new initiative in collaboration with one retailer, whereby Irish suppliers in challenged sectors (fulfilling certain conditions and screening), will be fast tracked for immediate national listing
- collaborating with retailers on specific promotions of Irish Quality assurance produce, for example, farmhouse cheeses, horticulture produce

I want to acknowledge the important role that the artisan food sector has played in supplying locally sourced products during these difficult times and I encourage producers to engage directly with LEADER, Bord Bia and their Local Enterprise Office for the supports that are available.

### **Brexit Issues**

176. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the degree to which he continues to monitor and engage with the various bodies involved in the fishing industry with particular reference to challenges arising from Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24425/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I would like to assure the Deputy that fisheries remains a high priority for Ireland. Brexit poses enormous challenges for the Irish fisheries sector and our coastal communities which are so reliant upon this sector.

This Government is 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. It has been made clear to the Fisheries Commissioner, Virginijus Sinkevicius, that this Government is placing our full reliance on Mr Barnier and the Commissioner to deliver on 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 have convened a Consultative Committee for this afternoon (16th September) of all Departmental stakeholders to allow for a full exchange of information as negotiations proceed and to provide updates on the practical implications of the ending of the transition period.

I am also meeting with representatives of the Irish fishing industry today, which will afford the industry the opportunity to discuss the challenges it faces as the UK leaves the Common Fisheries Policy. I will be making it clear that I will continue to press for a fisheries agreement with the UK that upholds both existing quota shares and existing reciprocal access to UK waters. I will also continue to press for the maintenance of the linkage of fisheries to the overall economic partnership agreement as this will be central to a successful fisheries agreement. I will also assure the industry representatives of my commitment, and that of the Government, to work towards a fisheries agreement with the UK that protects the interests of the Irish fishing industry and ensures a long-term future for our coastal communities dependant on fisheries.

Our enterprise agencies are continuing to work with seafood companies to help them to be market ready with the ending of the transition period.

### **Forestry Sector**

177. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on a matter regarding forestry applications (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24427/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Having previously conducted a similar exercise in Scotland, Mr. Jim Mackinnon, CBE, former Chief Planner with the Scottish Government, reviewed the forestry approval process and related issues in Ireland. The Review was published at the end of last year and presented to the Forestry Programme Implementation Group in January. Its implementation is one of the commitments which this Government made for forestry in the Programme for Government.

The report was informed by, among other things, discussions with a range of stakeholders including the forestry sector, farming organisations, the environmental pillar, State Bodies, Teagasc and the Forestry Appeals Committee. In addition, written submissions were received at the time.

The report includes 22 Ways Forward or recommendations across a range of issues. I am pleased to say that many of these recommendations have already been taken on board by the Department and acted upon. We are, for instance in line with Mackinnon, introducing an amendment to the Agriculture Appeals Act and have issued guidance on Natura Impact Statements. We have also introduced a single consent system for forestry road planning.

My Department has a history of continually developing and educating forestry professionals, which is an essential part of improving the quality of applications. This is borne out by the advice and guidance issued in forestry circulars and supporting documentation. Forestry professionals are also obliged to attend formal mandatory training sessions, usually held annually, however these are currently on hold during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Department funds the Continuous Professional Development programme run by the Society of Irish Foresters and the Department keeps under continuous review the training needs of professional foresters.

I recognise, of course, that it is very important that the Mackinnon Review is fully implemented and that is why I am currently examining the appointment of an independent chair to oversee the process. The intention is that this person will report on the feasibility of implementing the Mackinnon recommendations for us to consider further. A review of the Forestry Programme Implementation Group is currently underway to enhance representation so that the membership of the Group is best selected to help advise the Minister and the Department on the implementation of the National Programme.

There is currently a huge amount of activity in forestry, especially on the reform of the planning and appeals processes and the introduction to the House shortly of a Bill to amend the Agriculture Appeals Act, 2001. Nonetheless, I understand that implementation of the Mackinnon Review is also a priority and I expect to be making further announcements on this issue soon.

### **Agri-food Sector**

178. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if

he has met with the banking sector or farmers organisations regarding the interest rates being charged by banks here on farm related finance and loans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24331/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department meets and liaises with the main banks on access to finance issues relating to the agri-food sector and is currently scheduling meetings for me with the CEOs of the main banks. There is also good cross-Departmental cooperation on banking matters with the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (DBEI) and the Department of Finance. In recent years there have been a number of initiatives undertaken, primarily through the publicly-owned Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) to address gaps in the market. Currently, liquidity and working capital needs can be addressed through the COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme and longer-term investment needs by the Future Growth Loan Scheme

Last week, with my colleagues the Tánaiste and the Minister for Finance, I launched the €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme, the largest of its kind in the history of the state. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a severe disruption to economic activity. Following discussions early in the pandemic, the banking sector announced a three-month period of flexibility for customers, including provision of payment holidays or emergency working capital facilities. This was subsequently extended to six months and will expire in October. As the recovery begins, many COVID-impacted businesses will require additional liquidity and working capital facilities. The COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme is designed to incentivise finance providers to continue to support economic activity by providing liquidity and finance agreements to businesses. The Scheme is targeted towards businesses which have experienced an adverse impact of minimum 15% in actual or projected turnover or profit due to the impact of COVID 19 and have difficulties in accessing credit.

The CCGS will provide an 80% State-backed guarantee on bank lending to SMEs until the end of this year, for terms between 3 months and 6 years. The CRS will be administered for the State by the SBCI and SMEs will be able to go directly to the banks. The guarantee can be used for a wide range of lending products between €10,000 and €1 million, for terms between 3 months and 6 years. It will be available to all SME sectors, including primary producers, i.e. farmers and fishers.

The Future Growth Loan Scheme supports strategic long-term capital investment by SMEs, farmers and fishers. The Scheme was developed by DAFM and DBEI, in partnership with the Department of Finance, the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) and the European Investment Fund (EIF). It is being delivered through participating finance providers and made €300 million of investment loans available to eligible Irish businesses, including farmers and the agri-food & seafood sectors. The loans are competitively priced (an initial maximum loan interest rate of 4.5% for loans less than €250,000), are for terms of 8-10 years and support strategic long-term investment. A minimum loan amount of €100,000 applies up to a maximum of €3,000,000 per applicant. Considering the needs of Irish farmers, a specific minimum of €50,000 has been secured for them.

This is a financial product that was previously unavailable in Ireland. The unique characteristic of the Scheme is that loans up to €500,000 are unsecured making it a viable source of finance for young and new entrant farmers, especially the cohort who do not have high levels of security. It will also serve smaller-scale farmers, who often do not have the leverage to negotiate for more favourable terms with their banking institution. Food companies, too, have identified long-term investment finance of up to ten years as a critical need which is currently unavailable in Ireland. The effects of his product will be felt all along the food production chain from primary producer to processor. The Future Growth Loan Scheme has been open for loan eligibility

applications through the SBCI website since April 2019. The scheme has been a success with very strong demand for investment loans. As part of the Government's Covid-19 response, a second tranche of €500 million, with up to 40% available to the agri-food sector including farmers, was launched on 30th July 2020.

Food business operators can also avail of the Brexit Loan Scheme and COVID19 Working Capital scheme. Further information on any of these loan schemes can be found on the SBCI website ([www.sbc.ie](http://www.sbc.ie)).